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Science Fiction

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A Complete Novel

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Breakthroughs From
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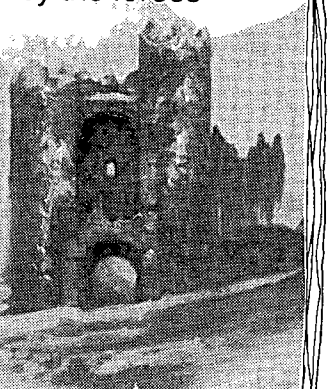

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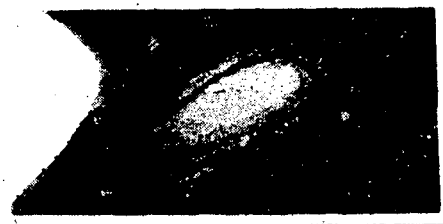

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EDITORIAL 4

THE INVASION OF AMERICA (Complete Novel)
Gil Lamont 5
How many nations, secretly, only wait for the day they can see their way clear?

STAR WARRIORS (II of II) Jesse Peel 35
If desperation is the mother of invention—then 2000 ships against 1 is a "mother" of a problem!

SF HOTLINE Warren/Elliott 60
What's happening in the SF world from coast-to-coast and border-to-border!

A BEAST FOR NORN (Novelette) George R.R. Martin 63
Making dumb beasts fight for sport is cruelty . . . so what punishment fits this crime?

INTERFACE/INTERSPACE Beal/Chalfin 82
Breakthroughs from the scientific horizon and from the scientific investigation of the paranormal.

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THE DEPRESSION OF 1980 (story)
George Alec Effinger **85**
It's just around the corner. . . . and it's coming ready or not!

JEM (IV of V) Fred Pohl **89**
The snake has struck in the Garden of Jem and now everyone is tasting the bitterness of forbidden fruit!

A LITTLE GIRL'S SPRING DAY IN MODERAN (story) David Bunch **122**
Before Bionics there was Moderan . . . after Moderan you will never be the same.

SF MART **127**

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from the Invasion of America

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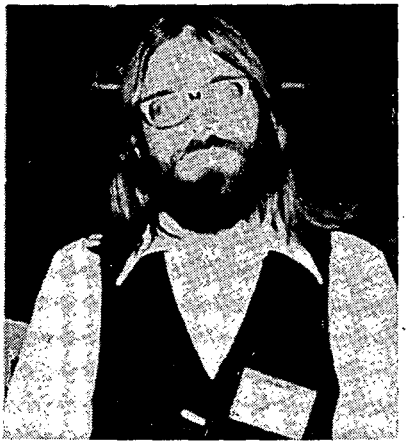

Hank Stine

I'm going to talk about a subject that appears to be of interest to a great many of you: *the writing of science fiction*.

Since becoming editor of this magazine nine months ago, I have read approximately five thousand manuscripts: Even allowing for repeat offenders, that means at least 2,500 different individuals have submitted stories to GALAXY; and I imagine the monthlies get about twice as many contributions, perhaps more—which means the total number of people attempting to write science fiction within any one year must be above 6,000 or more!

I doubt if in any other genera 10% of the average magazine's readership is attempting with any seriousness to write for it (actually, allowing for turnover, it's possible that up to 50% of readership tries at some time).

Out of this mass of manuscripts, the average magazine can print no more than about 100, often less, or about one out of 100—however professional, name writers can be counted on to fill up at least seven or eight out of ten of these slots—so the number of stories actually purchased from fledgling writers probably comes to no more than 20 or 30: This means the odds against actually making a sale and breaking into print are some *400 to 1*!

Allowing for the high attrition rate such odds engender, that means the average writer can expect to have the first hundred stories rejected before becoming so good he's in the top two percent and editors just have to buy his stuff (I personally know that Larry Niven and Steve Perry/Jesse Peel wrote a story a week for a year before breaking in.)

If odds like that don't deter you, then you *definitely* have the kind of imagination it takes to become a science-fiction writer!

—Hank Stine

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CHAPTER ONE

"With clear skies expected by tonight. Again, fair all day tomorrow. In other news, terrorists have taken over three key buildings in the Wash–"

Carl Hastings flipped off the radio and parked his Chevy in back of the MiniMart. He drained his coffee cup and got out, eyeing the weather while the wind whipped his trouser legs as he crossed the cracked concrete to the store's back door. Thunderheads were building in the north like black fists against the horizon, a result of the cold front that had snapped down from Canada. It would be lousy for business.

Carl was glad to get inside. He flicked on the lights, wincing at the sudden glare, and looked around to see that Adam, the night man, hadn't screwed up any more than usual. The coffee pot had boiled dry, a brown ring scumming the bottom, but the floor was swept and even the counter wiped off. Carl set another pot to brewing, then glanced through the register receipts. Business was already lousy . . . .

And unless he stayed open all night like a lot of other stores, it would stay lousy. If a couple of months ago he hadn't suffered that rash of robberies–three in as many weeks–he would have stayed open past midnight, but then night people were suddenly harder to find. He settled for early closing and lousy business.

Better to open up soon and see if there *was* any business. He let the old radio warm up, set up the nut for the day, closed the register drawer, unlocked the front doors, and turned the sign to YES! WE'RE *OPEN*. The clouds were really threatening now; the air smelled full of rain.

Sound faded in on the radio: ". . .ling themselves the Third World Liberation Coalition have occupied local government structures in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles as well. At this time it is not known how they acquired the nuc–"

Outside, lightning strafed the sky, followed immediately by a deafening thunderclap. The radio died and the lights went out.

"Damn," said Carl, and started looking for candles. He usually kept a box under the counter but Adam must have moved them. And the flashlight wasn't around either. That meant he'd have to open up a new one, plus supply it with batteries, meaning a further reduction in stock. "Damn," he said again.

Maybe he was just being petty, he thought, fumbling along the aisle for the housewares shelf. Maybe he wasn't cut out for general-store proprietorship. Maybe . . . .

He snorted ruefully. Maybe he needed another cup of coffee.

He used the flashlight to find the candles, then stood one in its own molten wax next to the register. The coffee pot had filled even though the warming ring was cold, and the aroma of hot, fresh coffee filled the store. He filled up the mug Amy had given him, the one that said *To the World's Greatest Husband*, and burned his tongue on the first sip.

About the time it began to rain he realized that the morning's papers hadn't shown up. Probably the delivery had been held up by the storm, but that

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meant no funnies and no crossword puzzle, and just sitting here by candlelight was beginning to bore Carl. It was a great relief when George Wojnekowski arrived with his delivery truck.

"Jeez, the rain's murder out there," said George as he walked in, a sheaf of manifests in one hand. "Kinda reminds me of my old lady's mashed potatoes," he said, winking. "If you know what I mean."

Carl chuckled. George was a balding, pot-bellied little man with a cigar stub jammed permanently in his mouth. Carl liked him a lot. "And how *is* Marge?"

George shrugged. "The same as ever. But she'll get over it. How's the family?"

Carl peered at the framed photograph on the wall of a smiling, good-looking brunette hugging a somber-faced small boy and girl. "The twins are back to hating school. Amy gets more beautiful every year." He grinned. "About the same."

"Well, that oughta be an improvement. Look, Carl, I'm dripping all over your floor. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Mopping up will give me something to do."

"Okay, I won't ask you how's business."

"Thanks. I'm going to go find the mop. Help yourself to some coffee while it's still warm." When he returned from the storeroom with a mop in one hand, a candle in the other, he found George staring sourly at the cover of the latest *Time* magazine. "What's wrong? Did you expect to see yourself?" Carl moved closer. "Or is that you and the light's too bad to tell?"

"Aw, I just hate to see these damned Ay-rabs getting all this goody-goody publicity while they're bleeding us white!"

Carl tried not to let the half-smile build on his face. "You got something personal against the Arabs, George?"

The little man poked his cigar stub at the front doors. The rain beat heavily against the glass, distorting the view of George's truck out front. "It ain't just the outrageous cost of gas to power that thing," he said emphatically, "though a man could go broke trying to keep up with that and what they charge a man these days to keep his house warm in the winter. It's the way they're trying to take over the country, buying banks and controlling stock in our giant corporations and setting up their fancy harems out in California in those Beverly Hills estates, and all with *our money!*" He slammed his coffee cup down on the counter. "That's what burns me up. We made them rich, gave them millions of our dollars, and now they've devalued the dollar while trying to buy their way into this country, 'cause the Ay-rabs have so much of our money it doesn't matter that the dollar ain't worth nothing these days!"

Carl reached for a paper towel. "Come on, George, I said 'personal.' That's a heck of a speech but what's it got to do with you?"

George was quiet for a few seconds, then said, "I'm sorry, Carl. It's been about a year since Joe died in the fighting, you know, after the Camp David peace accord fell through. I guess it gets to me."

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"George, I'm sorry. Can I do anything for you? Get you anything?"

"Just some more coffee. Listen, I'll get over it." His face visibly brightened. "Hey, let's get some work done around here. It looks like the rain ain't gonna let up for a while."

"Okay, George, what have you got for me this week?"

"Canned goods," the little man said, handing Carl the manifests. "You want I should start bringing them in?"

Carl held the manifests up close to the candle. "Just try to stay dry."

"Very funny," said George. "Har har." He turned his jacket collar up and prepared to brave the storm, but stopped with his hand on the door. "I wonder what the army is doing here?"

A covered jeep had pulled into the parking lot of the MiniMart. The Jeep was painted dark brown and a white star was painted on the door. The rain made it too murky to see who was in it or what might be in the back, but two men in fatigue uniforms got out of the jeep and ran inside the MiniMart.

"Now your Dubbayu Dubbayu Two," George began saying, "that was a real *shootin'* war . . . ."

The soldier with the sergeant's stripes, a tall black man with a stony face, positioned himself at the front door with his booted feet apart and his rifle at port arms. The other soldier, a short, swarthy man with tight black hair and a scar across his left cheek, wore captain's bars; the name patch above his right breast pocket read MONTOYA.

Montoya looked at Carl, then at George, and a smile puckered the scar on his cheek.

Carl felt a wave of cold fear suddenly rush up his spine.

Montoya said, "Which one of you gentlemen owns the vehicle parked outside?" His voice had a soft foreign-flavored cadence to it that to Carl's ears sounded sinister.

"I do," said George.

Captain Montoya held out his hand. "The keys, please."

"What?"

"Please to give me the keys." He stared at them in astonishment. "You have not heard the radio broadcast about the emergency, telling all citizens to give their full support to the armed forces?"

"As you can see," said Carl, "we've had a power failure."

"Ah, yes. The lights."

"What emergency?" said George.

The captain made a deprecating gesture. "Please. Our time is very limited and we must hurry. Human lives are at stake. Many human lives. So please give me your keys."

George slowly shook his head. "Not without some kind of authority," he said flatly. "That truck's my livelihood. You can't take that away from me, it's against the Constitution."

Montoya unbuttoned the flap of his holster and pulled out an automatic pistol. "This is my authority," he said coldly, and swept the barrel across George's face. The little man went down to the floor.

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Carl started around the end of the counter but was checked by the black sergeant's aiming his rifle.

The captain bent over George, riffled through his pockets, and straightened up holding George's key ring. He eyed George with distaste, then said to Carl, "You had better tell your friend here to cooperate more in the future. Or he might not have a future." He turned away and nodded to the sergeant.

Carl noticed George beginning to stir. Blood oozed from high up the little man's cheekbone. With elaborate casualness Carl said, "What outfit you guys with? So I'll know better next time."

The captain turned back. After some hesitation he said, "The Seventh Cavalry Division."

George was sitting up now, one hand on his head and the other behind him.

Carl's eyes flicked to the captain's shoulder patch.

So did George's.

That was when the little man threw the can of spaghetti at Montoya.

The captain fell back as the sergeant raised his rifle and fired. George was flung backwards into a display of potato chips. His arms flailed as he grabbed for support, and then he collapsed, bringing the rack down with him.

"Take anything you want," Carl said quickly. He stared at his friend while his mind whirled, trying to comprehend. He was dimly aware of a sharp loudness in the rain's ceaseless drumming as the two soldiers opened the doors and left. When he looked out a moment later, the parking lot was empty.

Blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, George was trying to speak. Carl brushed potato chips off him and saw bubbles in the blood welling from George's chest. The bullet had pierced the lung. Carl put his ear to the dying man's lips.

George's voice was a whisper. "Not . . . Seventh Cavalry . . . yellow patch . . . black stripe . . . black horse's head . . . ." He coughed. It sounded terrible.

Carl's eyes felt hot. "Take it easy, old friend," he said softly. "I'll get help."

"Too late . . . tell Marge . . . I love her . . . ." There was no more.

Carl sat down, blinking in confusion. What the hell was going on? The captain's shoulder patch had been a yellow circle quartered in red and black. If George was right (and he must have been right, because seeing the patch had made him willing to die), then the two soldiers had to be some kind of renegades or escaped convicts or invaders . . . .And why had they needed George's truck? For the supplies inside? Were there more of them?

Maybe there really was some kind of emergency!

The lights flickered once, twice, then came on fully. In the glare George's body looked both pathetic and grotesque, like a wax dummy that might have once thought it was human. Its eyes were glassy, but Carl imagined he could see accusation in their cold stare. Do something! they seemed to be telling him.

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Carl reached for the telephone, read the police number off the emergency sheet taped to the register, and while he tapped it, wondered why he had been unable to remember it. Was he always this unaware of things around him?

The earpiece beeped its little tune as the switches found the right line. The other end rang twice. "I'm sorry," a blurry voice came on to say, "but the number you have reached is not in service at this time." Carl tried it again and got the same answer. He called the fire department and let the phone ring thirty times before hanging up.

In the meantime the radio had come back to life. ". . . and all government business remains virtually at a standstill. White House and Joint Chiefs of Staff spokespersons have acknowledged that as yet they know of no defense against the Coalition's demands. Just how the nuclear warheads were brought into Washington and a dozen other major U.S. cities is also not known. And the number of American communities invaded by Coalition forces has been unofficially estimated to be in the thousands. Meanwhile on Wall Street panic ensued as . . . ."

As soon as the news sank in, Carl called Amy. She answered on the third ring.

"Amy? This is Carl."

"Then you heard what happened. Isn't it awful?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Carl, what are we going to do?"

"Listen to me carefully. Did the kids go to school yet?"

"No, the rain was so bad I thought I'd get Peggy to take them when she drove her kids over, but then when I heard the radio announcement . . ."

"Good, honey, good. Look. Pack all the warm clothes you can into that old steamer trunk of your grandmother's. I'll be home to get you and the kids as soon as I can."

"To get us? Carl, where are we going?"

"I–I don't know yet. Out of town. Somewhere."

"Is it that dangerous?"

"Two of them were in here just a little while ago. They shot George Wojnekowski and took his delivery truck."

"Oh, no! Not George! Does Marge know?"

"Not yet. Honey, would you call and tell her? I know you really should go over there, but . . ."

"I understand, Carl. I'll do it."

"Thanks."

"And Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you too. See you soon." He hung up and realized he felt no easier. Now he had to hurry. He hauled an empty carton from the back and began throwing into it canned foods, lots of paper towels and napkins, flashlight batteries, powdered milk, canned drinks of all kinds, a sheaf of comic books

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to keep the twins busy, paperbacks and magazines for Amy, Band-Aids, aspirin, instant coffee, sugar, anything and everything that had a long shelf life and didn't need much preparation. After a while stumbling over George's corpse began to make him sick so he dragged it behind the counter.

The cartons–there were three of them by now–were each heavier than he'd thought. He propped the back door open and was halfway out with the first carton when he saw that the rain was too heavy to do it this way. He lowered the carton to the floor and cursed at himself for his stupidity. He was wasting valuable time.

So he did what he should have done in the first place: parked the Chevy as close to the store as possible and then left the trunk and rear doors wide open. He filled the trunk and half the back seat with cartons. Amy's grandmother's trunk would take up the rest of the back seat, and the kids could ride up front with him and Amy.

Was he really ready to go now? Carl took a last quick look around the MiniMart. The shelves were a mess, some emptied, some with their contents spilled onto the floor; it looked like someone was in a hurry to leave. It looked like the end of something.

Carl emptied out the cash register. Ready cash might or might not prove useful where they were going (and where *were* they going?), but he couldn't see leaving it behind for the looters. There were bound to be looters.

As a farewell gesture he propped George's body up behind the counter, listening to a radio that had begun to repeat itself because no more news was coming in. He decided to leave the lights on and the doors unlocked. Even looters had to eat.

"Goodbye, old friend," he said softly, and went out the back way.

CHAPTER TWO

Driving along the old Taylor road was a mistake. At first it seemed a good idea, an impulse born of fear and haste. Avoid Main Street with its traffic, its visibility, its probable invading soldiers. Take Taylor where it paralleled Main for most of its length, then down Reservoir and home. But the blacktop had thinned and potholes played hell with the Chevy's suspension. The storm was unleashing the last of its fury now, the rain beating so hard against the windshield that the wipers were useless. It was like driving underwater. The headlights barely pierced the murk.

Working the pedals was giving him a charley horse; his back ached from too rigid a posture; his knuckles were white where he gripped the steering wheel. Carl didn't notice how tense he was. His thoughts kept flashing back to poor dead George, lying there drowned in his own blood.

Up ahead, Carl remembered, was the old Zachary Taylor High School. Condemned years ago for demolition, it would make an ideal hiding place, if ever he needed one. Might be worth checking out even now . . . .

Lightning struck somewhere behind him. The school stood out in sharp relief for just an instant before it faded: the two-storied main building, at one end the auditorium (where Carl's class had graduated so long ago), at

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the other end the gymnasium (where Carl had taken Amy for the Senior Prom), off to the side the athletic field. Where the near goalpost used to be was a tank. An Army tank.

Carl reacted without thinking. He spun the wheel around hard, fishtailing the car until it pointed in the direction he came from. He floored the gas pedal. Tires squealing, the car jumped forward. Racing over the broken blacktop, heedless of the potholes that shook him and jarred him and blurred his vision, he didn't begin to feel anywhere near safe until he topped a slight rise. As he checked the mirror for signs of pursuit–there were none–he heard a horn blare, snapped his eyes front and saw a truck bearing down on him at high speed, headlight on hi–beam.

Carl threw the wheel to the right. The truck, a half–ton pickup, whipped past him, the horn dopplering down. The Chevy rocked onto the shoulder, did not respond when Carl turned the wheel back, and ploughed into the roadside ditch. There was a muffled *whump* and the car lurched to a stop.

Carl felt acutely aware of his own mortality. More than George's death, more than potholes in the road, this had jarred him into accepting reality. He took a couple of deep breaths, feeling his heart pound, and unlocked his hands from the steering wheel. He was shaken up but alive, and after a while he managed to shove the door open and get out of the car.

The first thing he noticed was that the rain had stopped. Ahead of him the sky was still awash in storm clouds, but here the air smelled damp and clean, with a strange tranquility about it. His senses were amplified. Each drop of water on the car was a beaded jewel, every leaf on the roadside bush was vibrantly green. He heard the truck on the other side of the rise shift gears and turn.

Carl walked around to the front of the car and was aware of every particle of dirt that crunched under his shoes. He realized with transcendent clarity that the Chevy was no longer driveable. The right tire had exploded upon impact with the ditch, the bumper twisting up under the wheel well and right against the hub. The headlight had of course shattered. "Shit," said Carl and started kicking at the other headlight.

Over the rise came the pickup truck. It came to a stop beside the Chevy and a big beefy man in a blue jump suit exactly the same shade as the truck got out. "That was some close call," said the man. "You okay?"

"I'll live," said Carl. "I wish I could say the same for my car."

The man circled past Carl to inspect the damage. "I got a towline if you want to pull it back onto the road," he said. "A few days in the shop should fix it up okay."

Carl shook his head. "I don't have that much time."

The man peered into the back seat of the Chevy. "You running *to* or *from* something?" he asked, eyeing Carl shrewdly. He extended his hand. "The name's Wheeler. Rufus T. Wheeler."

"Carl Hastings." He did not shake Wheeler's hand. There was something about the man he didn't trust, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Wheeler let his hand drop. "That's okay. You don't have to be friendly.

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I mean, you never know just who you might meet these days." The man had an easy manner and an easier grin. "You want a lift back into town?"

Carl looked at Wheeler's pickup truck. There was a windshield decal on the driver's side, a decal of a yellow circle quartered in red and black. "I hate to leave my stuff behind."

"Bring it along. We can put it under the tarp in the back."

What was Wheeler's game? wondered Carl, suppressing his revulsion as they transferred the cartons from the Chevy. Maybe he'd better take some precautions. "Forgot something," he said as Wheeler climbed into the cab.

"Okay. I'm going to turn it around."

Carl pulled the jack handle from the Chevy while Wheeler made the U. He got in holding it against his leg, hoping that Wheeler wouldn't notice. The pickup had a shotgun hanging on a rack in the rear window. Carl felt foolish holding the jack handle.

"Guess you've been listening to the radio," said Wheeler as they started off. "You afraid of these . . . Coalition people?"

"Aren't you?"

"Naw, I get along good with everybody."

"Even with . . .?"

"Sure. A man's got to adapt himself to changing times."

Carl let that one pass for the moment. He stared out of the window at fences and trees flashing by. "This isn't the way back into town." They were turning onto a side road.

"Sure it is," said Wheeler. "This is a shortcut."

The "shortcut" would take them back behind the school. "No, it's not," said Carl. "You're lying."

"I thought we'd go see some friends of mine first. You know too much."

"What are you, a collaborator?"

Wheeler laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "I'm an agent, Hastings. And you may as well put that tire iron or whatever it is down. At this range I can't miss." His left hand appeared to have grown a gun, aimed at Carl. "Drop it. Out the window so I can see it."

Carl brought the jack handle up slowly. He held it at eye level with his left hand while his right rolled down the window. Fresh, cool air washed his face. This was it, now or never. He jabbed the jack handle left and down, all the while furiously grappling for the gun. The jack handle caught Wheeler across the face, breaking his nose. Blood gushed. The truck rolled on.

The men faced each other now, opposite hands at the gun. Despite Wheeler's advantage of size and strength, concentrating on the driving was beginning to exact its toll. Carl hit him again and again. As Wheeler's strength weakened, the gun twisted up and up, and then it was out of his hand and Carl had it. But Wheeler was unconscious or dead.

Carl grabbed the wheel as the truck began to slow. He couldn't reach the brake pedal so he did the next best thing: He turned off the ignition. The truck coasted to a stop.

It took him longer to recover this time, he was shaking so. Then he got

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disgusted and couldn't bear to look at Wheeler any longer. He leaned across the man, opened the door and, not caring if Wheeler was alive or dead, shoved him out. Wheeler landed on his shoulder, flopped onto his back and lay still.

Carl started the engine and leaned out of the window. "I appreciate your offer, Mr. Wheeler," he called, "but I prefer to go it alone. Thanks for the use of your truck."

CHAPTER THREE

Carl parked the blue pickup in the middle of the garage and pulled the door down and shut after it. Getting from where he'd dumped Wheeler to here–home–had been almost foolishly easy. An enemy patrol in a jeep had passed him on Main Street without incident, had in fact signaled to him as he went by, and Carl had figured out why. The windshield decal that had alerted him to Wheeler was his ticket to a safe passage.

He was standing in the darkness of the garage still thinking these thoughts when the door from the kitchen burst open and Amy rushed into his arms. "Oh, Carl, I was so worried!" she cried. "It seemed like hours since you called, and I was so afraid that–that–" She hugged him tight, tighter.

"For a while I was afraid I wouldn't make it either," Carl murmured, stroking her hair softly, so glad to be back in her arms. The light spilling from the kitchen highlighted the red in her rich dark hair. Amy smelled so clean and fresh, of shampoo and perfume and . . . cookies?

He held her at arm's length. "You've been baking!"

"Mm–hm." She gave him a kiss. "I'm about to start another batch. Notice the apron?" She pirouetted. "The wooden spoon smearing cookie dough on your shirt?"

"I notice," he said, eyeing her appreciatively. "But I think it was your perfume that gave me the first clue."

"My perfume?"

"Eau de chocolate chip." He grinned as Amy laughed. "The kids inside?"

She nodded. "That's why I'm making cookies. Carl, what happened to the car? And where did you get that pickup truck?"

"Let's go inside and I'll tell you."

Arm in arm they entered the kitchen, stopping every few steps to reassure themselves of each other's presence with hugs and kisses. The kitchen was warm and homey, full of the aroma of fresh baking, an oasis of comfortable domesticity amid the bizarre happenings of Carl's day thus far. He sat at the table, fingering the wood–grained formica surface with renewed delight. It was so good to be *home!*

"Want some coffee?"

"Please. I feel like I've been dragged through a pond."

"You look it too. I'll get you a cup as soon as I finish mixing this dough."

Carl planted his elbows on the table and rested his chin in cupped hands. Watching Army was a delight, too. She was so pretty and vivacious, even wearing a mundane costume of blue jeans and a plaid shirt, even doing

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something as mundane as stirring cookie dough. After two kids and eight years of marriage, her figure was still as girlish in her tight clothes as when they first met. He found the interplay of muscles in her butt and the backs of her legs deeply moving and more exciting with every passing year. He rose and crossed to her, putting his arms around her waist from behind and nuzzling her neck.

"You couldn't wait for your coffee? It's in the pot on the stove."

He kissed the mole under her left ear. "I had something else in mind."

"I'll just bet you did." She let go of the spoon as his tongue traced the shell of her ear. "Mmm. You ought to stop that."

"I can't help it. It must be the chocolate chips. They drive me wild with desire."

"You animal. Stop it." She made a determined effort to resume the mixing. "What is it about getting grimy that gives some men sex on the brain?"

Between nibbles on her earlobe Carl said, "Come upstairs and I'll show you."

Amy turned with mock anger. "Can't you take a hint? *Not* until you have some coffee, *not* until you take a shower, *not* until I finish making these cookies, and *most definitely* not until you tell me what happened!"

"Promise?" riposted Carl, retreating to the table when Amy threatened him with the spoon. She brought him coffee a few minutes later and sat opposite, staring at him with mute expectance.

"I don't want the kids to hear it," she said, "and they can't play upstairs forever, so you'd better tell me fast."

Carl briefly related the story of the two soldiers in the MiniMart. Amy gasped when he told her how George died, and put her hand on top of his when he described his flight and seeing the tank out at the old school. And when he recounted the affair of Wheeler, color spotted her cheeks and her eyes opened wide in horror. "What an awful man," she said. "Carl, he could have killed you!"

"He would have, given the chance," Carl agreed. "I was lucky to get away from him."

"Maybe it wasn't only luck."

"What? You mean Fate?"

"Why not? You said yourself that you got past the soldiers by using his truck. And since we have to get out of here . . . ."

". . . we'll do it in the truck," Carl finished. "I already thought of that. That's why I haven't been in such a hurry to leave right away." He glanced up at the wall clock above the door to the garage. It was already after twelve. "But time *is* moving on. I'm going to go upstairs and take a shower."

There was the smallest of burning smells. "Oh, no!" cried Amy. "My cookies!"

Halfway up the stairs Carl was ambushed by a pair of giggling seven-year-olds. "Cheryl! Jimmy!" he called to them as Jimmy wrapped his small arms around Carl's left leg and Cheryl tried to climb onto his shoulders. Carl managed to bull his way upstairs, half-carrying Cheryl,

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half–dragging Jimmy. He deposited them carefully on the landing and tried to look sternly at them. But they were so cute! Jimmy had his Darth Vader t–shirt on backward and Cheryl had managed to smear chocolate chips all over C3PO on the front of her t–shirt.

"Daddy, I didn't have to go to school today," Cheryl announced.

"Me too," said Jimmy. "And I wasn't scared by the thunder and lightning either."

"Was too!" declared Cheryl.

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

"Knock it off, you two," Carl chided them gently. "Did you finish your cookies?"

"Uh-huh." "Uh-huh."

"Want some more?"

"Yeah!" they chorused. And before Carl could say any more, they marched down the stairs chanting "Cookies! Cookies!" as their battle cry. Carl listened to their voices fading down into the kitchen and chuckled to himself. They were great kids. He was the luckiest man alive.

Ten minutes of hot shower left him feeling refreshed and renewed, ready to face whatever emergencies or horrors lay in store. He took his time getting dressed, selecting denim pants and a turtle–neck knit, thick socks and rubber–soled shoes. With his windbreaker over the shirt he would be comfortably warm yet able to move easily. He checked himself out in the mirror and was thoroughly satisfied with what he saw. Better and better, he thought. Now he could handle anything.

But as he sat on the bed to tighten his shoelaces, a wave of ineffable sadness came over him. Leaving this house with its memories, its embodiment of all their hopes and wishes and dreams, was going to be painful after all. And so much was left undone! A treehouse for the kids in the backyard. A rec room in the basement. Wood paneling in the den. All postponed or abandoned now . . . .

The sadness passed. It would hurt to leave the house, yes, but it was a distant hurt now, remote until summoned by the mind, like a lost parent's love.

Carl went into the bathroom and scrubbed his face vigorously. No more of this sentimental nonsense! he chastised himself, then made his way down the stairs.

Cheryl was the first to see him when he poked his head around the kitchen doorway. She was picking chocolate chips out of a cookie with her fingernail and staring intently at it before sucking the chocolate off, but when she noticed him, she grinned mischievously and shoved the entire cookie into her mouth.

Carl laughed. He sat at the table with her, gaping at her pop–eyed while she unchipped another cookie and presented it gravely to him.

"Oh, Carl, don't encourage her. It's disgusting." Amy was at the sink, washing dishes.

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Carl turned to her with the same pop-eyed expression and calmly stuffed the cookie into his mouth. Jimmy giggled with his own mouth full and began to choke. Carl pounded him on the back.

Amy couldn't help but laugh. "You're terrible," she told him and Carl agreed with her. "By the way," she added as Carl advanced toward her with a cookie in each hand, "a sound truck came by while you were in the shower." She hastily wiped her hands dry and retreated with the damp dish towel held in front of her as protection.

Carl relaxed. "What was it about?"

"It said there would be a telecast at one o'clock and that everybody had to watch it."

"It's nearly one now."

"I'll go turn on the tv," said Jimmy.

"Me too," said Cheryl. They scampered into the living room.

As soon as they were gone, Carl leaned forward. "I forgot to ask you earlier," he said, his voice low. "Have you called Marge yet to tell her about George?"

Amy nodded. "Right after you called me this morning. And then after you told me *how* it happened I phoned her again, just a little while ago."

"How did she take it?"

"She didn't know who I was the first time and couldn't understand why I was calling. It wasn't easy getting it through to her."

Carl nodded to show that he understood. He and Amy had socialized with the Wojnekowskis only a couple of times before discovering that the wives had nothing in common.

"I really couldn't do anything for her," Amy continued, "except to say that I was sorry. She seemed to be in shock. I guess it's really been hard on her, George dying so soon after their son Joe."

"And the second time?"

Amy frowned. "She knew who I was right away but I don't think she heard me. I had to repeat everything. She sounded like she'd been drinking or had taken tranquilizers. When I told her how George had said he loved her right before he died, she started crying." Amy's eyes were filled with tears. "Oh, Carl," she pleaded, "couldn't we take her with us?"

Carl put his arms around her. "I wish we could, honey," he said softly, "but there's no way. We just don't have the room." He let her sob against him for a while, then lifted her chin and kissed away her tears. "Come on," he said, "let's go watch that telecast."

Cheryl and Jimmy *ssshed* them as they entered the living room. A familiar symbol filled the screen: a yellow circle quartered in red and black. The symbol stayed as, offscreen, a crisp voice in the precise enunciations of an English accent spoke. "This is your Provisional Government speaking. At eleven fifteen this morning, Eastern Standard Time, the President of the United States ceded executive control of Congress and the Armed Forces to leaders of the Third World Liberation Coalition, shortly after Coalition forces liberated the capital city from the oppressive yoke of American capitalism.

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"Effective immediately the following emergency measures will be in force. A curfew from six p.m. to six a.m. will be strictly observed. All radio, television, and newspaper activity will be suspended until the proper censorship boards can be established. All schools will be closed. All banks will be closed. All gasoline will be rationed. All travel outside community borders is restricted to those with permits. All weapons are prohibited. Gatherings of more than five persons, except for the purposes of worship, is forbidden. Violators will be shot."

Carl emitted a low whistle. Amy clutched his hand for comfort and signaled the kids to join them.

"These emergency measures," the voice went on smoothly, "are of course only temporary. It will take your new government a few days to round up the traitors and profitmongers who have too long benefited at the expense of the American people. These few days will be hard on all of us. But we ask that all loyal Americans accept without question the authority of the Coalition's local directors who will soon make themselves known to you. We ask that you assist them in all possible ways so as to effect a smooth transition to a government that is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people.

"For too long have the American people allowed themselves to be bullied by Big Business and its influence over the late administration. Giant corporations pay no taxes while government services for middle– and lower–income classes flounder for lack of funds. Unions conspire with government trade restrictions to force prices higher, thus ensuring through inflation that only the very rich can afford a decent standard of living. Special business monopolies accrue enormous profits through federal regulation of alcohol and tobacco while encouraging the rise of organized crime through unreasonable drug prohibition.

"These and other injustices must cease.

"Over the next few months your new government will introduce significant reforms. Immediate priorities are food and housing, to be followed by lower gasoline prices and the abolition of the 55 m.p.h. speed limit. Later reforms will include among others the legalization of marijuana, the elimination of sexual discrimination on all levels, the reinstatement of capital punishment, free abortions, and unrestricted foreign trade.

"We call on every American citizen to join us in the glorious struggle for a new birth of freedom, when government will truly be 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.'

"This broadcast will repeat every hour until curfew."

The only picture during the entire broadcast had been the Coalition symbol. Now it faded to black and snow filled the screen. Carl got up and turned the television off.

"Hey," said Jimmy, "I wanna watch cartoons."

"Me too," said Cheryl.

"Cartoons aren't on now," Amy said in a small voice. "Why don't you go upstairs to your room and play?"

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"I wanna watch tv," said Cheryl.

"Me too," said Jimmy.

"You heard your mother," Carl snapped, then relented when their little faces showed fright. "Go on now. I'll bring you up some comic books in a few minutes." He looked back at Amy sitting on the couch. She looked frightened too, and clutched at him as he returned to her.

"Do you think they really mean it?" Her voice had lost all of its lower tones and came out a whisper.

"That curfew business? Oh, I'm sure of it. We can't do anything now without their approval."

"What about the other stuff? Those reforms?"

Carl laughed bitterly. "Fancy talk. Carrots to dangle in front of every half-baked liberal in the country. A little something for everybody. That little touch about the speed limit was a beauty."

"Then you really do want to leave?"

"You don't?" She looked uncertain. "Amy, my love, don't believe everything you hear on television. There's about as much chance of those reforms happening as there is of the emergency measures being temporary. Don't you see that we have to get out while we still can?"

"You mean the truck."

"Yes. It's the only passport to freedom we've got. Why not use it?"

"I guess I just hate to give all this up," she said ruefully. "The house, the store. Everything we've worked for."

"They'll make us give it all up anyway. The Third World Liberation Coalition, whatever that is." He held her by the shoulders and looked full into her face.

A minute passed. Her eyes dropped. "Okay," she said at last in a voice so tiny he could barely hear her. "Okay. We'll leave."

"I'll go get the kids their comics. Are you about done packing?"

Her face seemed to grow more gaunt with every passing second, the skin stretched tight over her cheekbones. "The trunk's upstairs on the landing. I laid out a fresh change of clothes for the kids on their beds." Her eyes bore pain and resignation. "I'm scared, Carl. I'm really scared."

Carl drew her to him but she was wooden in his arms. "Me too," he said tenderly. "Me too."

She did not give him the small smile he expected.

CHAPTER FOUR

The journey through town was eerily quiet. The pickup truck glided smoothly over the glistening residential streets, silent but for the hiss of tires on pavement. No one was about, though front curtains shifted in the windows of the houses as the truck passed by.

The tension in the cab was almost electric, a high-voltage mood that issued from Amy and transformed even the kids' normally high spirits into gloom. The comic books sat in their laps, unopened and unread. Their faces were sullen and unhappy, and Carl wished it could be otherwise.

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Sound faded in as they approached Main Street: the crackle of distant gunfire, far-off pounding. In the west a long column of black smoke and white smoke, intertwined, curled up into the sky. Carl turned the truck onto Main and reluctantly headed toward the smoke. This section of downtown was beginning to look like a battle zone, an impression confirmed when they passed the fire station. The doors were wide open, the fire trucks gone, on the floor at the back what looked like bodies in uniform.

Amy gasped and tried to cover the children's faces with her hands. "Mommy," whined Cheryl, "you're hurting me!"

"Sorry, sweetie. I just didn't want you to see."

"I saw!" declared Jimmy. "I saw dead people."

"I wanna see too!" said Cheryl.

"Hush, now," said Carl. "You're upsetting your mother." But he was glad for the sound of voices; it helped ease the tension. And now the children became more animated, pointing out to each other the closed storefronts and deserted gas stations. Here was a liquor store with its front window smashed, broken glass and what was left of a "Burgie" sign littering the sidewalk. There, across the street, two clothing store mannequins had collapsed against each other, feigning death.

Up ahead there were some soldiers, heading their way.

Carl's first impulse was to panic. Run them down or blow them all to hell with the shotgun. Stomp on the gas and race out of there before retribution followed. And then common sense prevailed. Wait and see. Hide if need be, do what you can to protect the kids and Amy, but wait and see.

He swung the pickup into the next alley on the right and parked. He adjusted the side and rearview mirrors, then slumped in his seat and waited. In the mirrors his vista was of the mouth of the alley, the street, on the other side a shoe store and a Walgreen's.

After a time the soldiers came into view. There were four of them, of assorted ages and sizes: woolly-haired and black-skinned; dark-skinned, dark-eyed, straight jet-black hair; short, sallow-skinned, with features of an Oriental cast; olive-skinned and turbaned.

They looked like no army Carl had ever seen.

Prowling up Main Street, seeking (probably) resistors, they crouched and ran, swaggered and strode, alternately playing predator and prey. One of them, the short one with the almond eyes, glanced incuriously into the alley before moving on.

Everything would have been fine if Cheryl hadn't chosen that moment to sit up and turn around.

Carl yanked her down but it was too late. The Oriental came creeping forward, his rifle at port arms, ready to swing it down and fire. Carl cursed silently to himself and got out of the pickup with his arms held straight up, though not before telling Amy to take over the wheel and go when he said *Go*. The soldier gestured with his rifle. Carl waggled his arms to show that they were already raised as high as he could get them and crab-walked slowly to the side of the alley, the soldier's eyes following.

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The pickup started with a muffled roar and the soldier's gaze shifted, his eyebrows lowering in suspicion. He half–turned his head and barked a monosyllable over his shoulder, and at that instant Carl shouted "Go!" The pickup took off with a squeal of tires and an acrid cloud of exhaust fumes. Carl watched it go while the soldier stood dumbfounded, then turned to face the soldier with a sheepish grin. The soldier glowered.

Into the alley at a sprint came the other three. The tallest of them, the black, conferred with the Oriental in what sounded to Carl like French, while the other two fired futilely at the rapidly receding truck. The truck turned a corner and was gone.

The black turned to Carl. He was a head taller than Carl, and his eyes commanded Carl to look up into them until the gaze burned and Carl was forced to look away. He dropped his head and found himself staring at the black soldier's name patch: NKELE. Nkele extended his rifle and lifted Carl's chin up by the tip of the barrel. "Qui êtes-vous?" he demanded.

"What?" said Carl. "I don't speak–"

The rifle tip slid along his jawline and pressed against his neck. "Comment vous appellez–vous?"

That one he remembered from one semester of high-school French a thousand years ago. "Carl Hastings." And as soon as he said it, he swore under his breath. Why hadn't he used his brains a bit and said "Rufus T. Wheeler" instead?

"Carl Hastings?" repeated Nkele to the others. They shook their heads. Nkele unbuttoned his blouse and pulled out a wrinkled and much–folded sheet of paper, which he scanned twice before putting it back. "Carl Hastings," he said again, this time with an obvious distaste.

Carl felt his knees turning into jelly.

Something exploded close by on Main Street. Nkele's head whipped up. He stayed the others with his hand, looked back at Carl. "Cet homme n'est pas un agent en secret," he said to the Oriental soldier. "Vous tuez lui." Then he and the others dashed out of the alley, leaving the Oriental to face Carl alone.

That was no problem for the soldier. Carl was unarmed.

The soldier stepped back and aimed his rifle at Carl's chest.

Carl closed his eyes and waited for the end. His fervent hope was that Amy and the children had gotten away somewhere safe.

There was another nearby explosion and then the sharp *crack* of a shot.

Carl's knees folded. He slid down the wall to rest in a shallow puddle.

"Hey, man! You ain't dead yet! Open your eyes!"

Carl opened his eyes. A few feet away lay the soldier, the center of a red puddle.

"That's right!" came the voice again, cheerfully. "He's the one who's dead, not you."

Carl didn't believe it. "I don't believe it," he said aloud.

"Sure, don't take my word for it," the voice said calmly. "Check it out for yourself. And start with yourself. Any wounds, bleeding, pain, bullet

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holes, anything like that?"

Carl examined himself carefully. "No," he admitted after a while.

"You see. I told you. Now check the dearly departed."

Carl crawled forward. The soldier was dead, there was no doubt about that. He stared upward with sightless eyes while a sticky pool of crimson expanded from the middle of his back. In death he looked younger.

"Well?" the voice persisted. "Am I right or am I right?"

"You're right," said Carl. "He's dead and I'm alive. Who the hell am I talking to?"

"Could be I'm your guardian angel. Look up. Higher. Higher than that."

Up at the roof edge, outlined by a nimbus of cloud-washed sky, a dark face grinned back at him. One arm was lifted and it waved at him.

Carl waved back. "But who *are* you?"

"Come on up and I'll tell you. You'll find a door about halfway up the alley on this side. If it's not open, use that dead guy's rifle to shoot the lock. Anyway, bring his rifle with you. And check his body for ammo, too." Then the face disappeared.

The door was sealed with a rusty padlock. Carl blew the lock off with a rifle burst and yanked at the handle. Hinges screamed as the door slowly opened. Inside it was a windowless and lightless corridor, dimly lit by daylight leaked in from the alley. Suppressing his apprehensions, Carl went in.

He had gone only a few steps when an outside clamor convinced him to pull the door shut from the inside. Now the darkness was virtually total. Holding the rifle out and down like a blindman's cane, Carl moved gingerly forward. He could see nothing. He brushed the left wall with his fingertips, encountering varied textures of smooth plaster, wooden molding, door panels and the like. And the farther in he went, the less sound he heard, until at last only the soft sigh of his feet shuffling in the thick dust reached his ears. He felt utterly isolated.

Soon he no longer had even a left wall to guide him, as the surface under his fingertips fell away. The rifle barrel ran aground with a *chunk*. Carl eased forward until he touched the wall directly ahead of him. Okay, which way to go? Right or left? He turned right, moving on as before: rifle extended, left hand trailing the wall. But after a few steps he came to a dead end. He stopped, turned around, began heading back, and then his hand brushed a string or a wire, and something fell on him.

It had weight, but of a temporary kind. Its initial impact felled him but could not hold him down, for there was nothing there. It seemed to have spread itself over his head and shoulders, clotting in his hair and at the back of his neck where the sweat had been. He shifted to his knees, reached up to take a handful of the stuff even as it fell off his shoulders and recognized it as some kind of powder: dust or plaster or flour. He brushed it off his face and then he laughed without knowing why. He groped around for the rifle, found it and continued on his way.

An empty sensation under his fingers told him when he passed the corridor leading back to the door and the alley. Almost immediately his toes were

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touching the bottom riser of what the rifle told him was a flight of stairs. He started up.

The stairway was steep and narrow and there was no banister to hang onto. He placed his hand flat against the wall and took his time climbing. As he rose, step by weary step, his sense of isolation increased until it seemed he was all there was in the universe, just him and the stairs which he had to climb endlessly and forever. He sloughed off thoughts of Amy, good wife and true, and Cheryl and Jimmy, the greatest of kids, and the MiniMart and George Wojnekowski, both now lost to the present and the future, and what the hell was it all about, anyway? Why had *this* happened, and *that* and *that?* What was happening to the country? And why was he doing this?

Only after he had–at last!–come to the top of the stairs and had seen the thin crack of light that denoted a door, and pushed through it into daylight, did he begin to understand. He was here because someone had told him to be here. And what had happened had happened.

These were not answers. But they were better than constantly asking himself questions for which there were no answers.

"Man, I thought you'd never get here," said a voice as he emerged. "But keep it cool coz we got company."

Carl realized the voice had been whispering. It had only seemed loud in comparison to the silence he had just ascended through. He walked out onto the rooftop and stood staring for a while. From where the black smoke still rose in the west, he could see orange flames and an occasional fireball shoot up from the roof and gutted windows of the city hall. He stepped out to get a closer look when a hand yanked him down.

It was the black man. "You want to get killed?" he whispered fiercely. "If you gotta take a look, crawl on your belly over here and catch what's goin' down."

Carl followed the black man's example and slid over to the roof edge. Cautiously he looked down onto Main Street.

There were bodies down there, sprawled on the pavement. Bodies he recognized as being the soldiers he'd confronted in the alley. Other soldiers too were there, live soldiers, four as before. They surrounded a blue pickup truck.

God bless her, she'd come back for him. It was a useless gesture but a noble one, and it spelled doom for her and the kids. In that moment he felt a love for her so fervent that it spilled out of his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

"Your wife, huh?" said the black man beside him.

Unable to find his voice, Carl nodded.

Apparently the patrol had just stopped the truck, though Carl wondered if that clamor he had heard just after entering the building had something to do with what he now saw below him. As he watched, a soldier jerked open the door on the driver's side and dragged Amy out; she bit and kicked until the soldier hit her, and then the fight seemed to go out of her. Other soldiers took the children out. Cheryl clung defiantly to her comic books and Jimmy

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began to cry.

One soldier who had stood quietly by and watched all this now strode forward, regarded Amy in silence for a moment and then smacked her full across the face. The sound of the slap was sharp and clear, and made the hairs at the back of Carl's neck bristle with anger. Then the soldier spoke, in a contralto with a heavy German accent. "Where did you get this pickup truck?"

Amy stared at her blankly.

"The owner of this truck was found a few hours ago on the other side of town. He had been badly beaten. I ask you again, where did you get this truck?" At no time did she raise her voice above a matter-of-fact tone.

When Amy made no reply again, the woman signaled to the soldier holding Jimmy. The soldier twisted Jimmy's arm up behind his back and Jimmy let out with a shrill scream that had Carl trying to rise to his feet, except that the man beside him knocked him down and held his hand firmly pressed over Carl's mouth.

"You want us *all* to die?" he demanded. "There's nothing you can do right now. Nothing! They got your family and they're gonna mess with them, but unless you decide to play hero, they got a good chance of staying alive. You understand what I'm saying?" Carl nodded assent and the man let him up. "Now we watch and we listen," he continued in his whisper, "and we wait."

"I told you I don't know," Amy was saying between what sounded like sobs. "My husband, he . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Carl looked over the roof edge. Now both children were crying as well, but Amy appeared defiant, as if she would be bullied no longer. But what if they hurt the kids some more? Carl wondered. He wasn't sure he could hold himself back if they hurt the kids some more.

The German woman had picked up a corner of the tarpaulin in the back of the truck and was examining the boxes there. "You were planning to run away, ja?" she said. "You and your husband and your family?" Still in the same even tone. Then her hand smacked the side of the truck and she bellowed: "You know you can be shot for this! Right now if I order it!" She glared at Amy and Amy stared back, and Cheryl and Jimmy began a new spate of crying. Still Amy said nothing.

"I'm tired of talking to them," said the woman to the others. "Take them and the truck back to Headquarters. I will meet you there later with the jeep."

As soon as the soldiers had passed out of sight, the black man turned to Carl and stuck out his hand. "I'm Amos Sampson, who are you?"

Sampson's grip was firm and dry. "Carl Hastings," said Carl. "What are you doing up here?"

"Same as you," replied Sampson with a grin. "Hiding. Only I got some muscle." His glance led Carl's eye to a small cache of weapons near them which Carl in his single-mindedness had not noticed before. The cache consisted of two rifles, a pistol, clips of ammunition and a few grenades.

"Where did you get it?"

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"Same place you got your rifle. From the dearly departed."

Carl had forgotten the rifle. He looked at it now, and he looked at Sampson. The man wore dark pants, dark shoes, dark shirt, dark windbreaker. Even resting, he possessed an inner tension like a coiled spring, seemingly ready to tackle any situation. "I used to own a general store. What do you do?"

Sampson rolled onto his back. He clasped his hands behind his head and stared up at the scudding clouds. "I used to be a security guard," he began quietly. "Until this morning. As I was coming off duty, I saw them coming down Main Street, a couple of jeeps leading a couple of dozen soldiers. They were shooting everyone they saw who was in uniform. Cops, firemen, nurses, pharmacists, crossing guards, boy scouts, it didn't matter. They started with the fire station and then moved on toward City Hall. I stripped off my uniform and ran home half naked, got dressed and snuck back there. I played guerrilla during the rain, picking them off as I could and trying not to get caught. Since the rain stopped I've been up here, doing what I can for the Resistance. You know, little things." He grinned again. "Things like saving your life."

"I can't thank you enough for that," Carl admitted. "But who are these people trying to take over? What is the Third World Liberation Coalition? What do they want from us?"

"Man, you're full of questions, aren't you?"

"You're the one with a grasp on the situation. All I've been doing since they came is running and hiding. And look what it got me. My wife, my kids, they . . ."

"Hey, take it easy," said Sampson. "I'll talk, okay?" He was up on one elbow, concern spreading across his face. "I was just mouthing off. Forget it, okay?"

Carl gave him a sullen nod. "Okay."

Sampson smiled as he shook his head. "Man, you are going to make me blow my cover. But I guess it's too late to hang onto it now. Okay. Here's what I know." He leaned back again and his eyes narrowed as if he was studying an invisible dossier. "The woman who was interrogating your wife is Eva Obendrein; until recently we thought she was still in West Germany coordinating terrorist attacks for the Baader–Meinhof gang. Now we know better. She is quite ruthless and there is a strong possibility that she will have your family executed if she can find some dogma to justify; if not, she might just hold them prisoner. Or they may be made examples of. I really don't know.

"The Third World Liberation Coalition seems to be a front for a number of terrorist groups–Italy's Red Brigades, Dutch Red Help, the IRA, the Japanese United Red Army, the Iranian National Front, and so on–in alliance with the Nicaraguan rebels of the Sardinista National Liberation Front and government forces from Cambodia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Syria, Lebanon and other Arab countries. How they've decided who's in command, how they're resolved their ideological differences, we have no idea. We don't even know for sure which countries and groups are part of the Coalition and which are red herrings, intelligence 'leaked' by the Coalition to confuse us.

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"There's so much we don't know! How they got the nuclear warheads into our major cities, how they got their forces into the country, how they managed to infiltrate nearly every community of any size, how many troops they actually have . . . ." The smile had long since faded. Now only sadness remained. "Hell, they've whipped us but good!"

Carl thrust his head over the edge, counting bodies. "You're doing all right."

Sampson let loose a snort. "Chicken feed," he said. "I'm just a dog nipping at their heels."

Carl looked at the sky, looked at the street, watched the city hall burn, studied the still forms littering the lawn of the police station. "Bullshit!" he exploded. "Don't give me any of that self-pity tripe. This morning I lost a good friend. This afternoon I lost my family. And in between I almost got killed by one of *their* agents." Now he was pacing, back and forth, back and forth, letting the anger build. "Before, I was ready to run away. I couldn't face the idea of my country being invaded, and I couldn't see how I could do anything about it. But now you've shown me how. *Of course* we nip at their heels. Of course we pick them off one by one, as best we can. How else are we going to get our country back from these–these–*animals!?*"

Sampson clapped his hands three times in laconic applause. "Thank you," he said with what seemed to be genuine sincerity.

Carl was puzzled. "For what?"

"For convincing yourself to stay and fight. I was beginning to think I'd have to do it alone."

Carl stood there until the idea sank in, then exhaled in a slow whistle. "Amos, you're a son of a bitch."

The faint grin on Amos's face grew loud. "Why, thank you, Carl. That's mighty white of you."

"Huh?"

"I didn't mention it before, but you got some kind of white powder all over you."

"I forgot all about it. Some kind of dust fell on me as I was coming up the stairs. I hit a wire or something and it all just cascaded down on top of me."

"Must have been plaster from the ceiling. This old building's been threatening to fall down for some time."

"That's what I thought had happened to me. But what the hell are we hanging around here for?"

"Relax," said Amos. "It'll stand up for a few hours longer, at least until dark."

"And then what?"

"Then we go play hero and rescue your family."

CHAPTER FIVE

The dusk deepened, blue shading into black.

On the rooftop, Carl watched the stars come out slowly, one by one.

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Ragged patches of clouds tried in vain to hide the thin crescent of the moon. "Star light, star bright . . ." murmured Carl, wishing, wishing.

"Hey, dude," said Amos, coming up behind him, "put these on. It's getting close to time." He thrust the bundle of clothes into Carl's hands and ambled over to the weapons cache.

"What's this?" said Carl as he unfolded the bundle.

"What's it look like, thermal underwear? These are our credentials, jack, for getting into the inner sanctum."

Carl peeled off his shirt and began pulling on the fatigue blouse. "And for getting out?"

"First let's worry about getting in." Amos was methodically breaking down one of the rifles into its component parts. "That thing fit okay? I had to guess on your size."

"It'll do," said Carl, stepping into the fatigue pants. "I don't see how you can do that in the dark."

"Easy. Learned it in my third week of Basic Training." The rifle was in pieces now. Amos removed the cleaning kit from the stock and began to oil and swab the barrel. "You have a good sleep?"

"Some," Carl allowed. The boots were going to be a bit tight. "Were you in Vietnam?"

Amos shrugged. "I don't brag about it. You?"

"Student deferment."

"Lucky."

"Maybe. It didn't help me get it together."

It was too dark to see, but Carl felt Amos's stare shifting all over him, making the unspoken comment, *You think 'Nam would have done it for you?* Instead Amos said, "Speaking of getting it together . . ." and he stood up and handed Carl a rifle. "Put this over your shoulder. And hold this one."

"Why two?"

"We'll need them, trust me. And here's your half of the ammo." He dumped the clips into Carl's hands and moved away, only to reappear a few seconds later at the rooftop door, conducting a beam from his pencil flash to Carl's boot tips and back again. Carl ran to catch up, wondering how Amos moved so lightly when he himself was weighted down by ammunition clips in front, back and thigh pockets. He reached the bottom of the stairs with a clatter of his thick boots and received from Amos a sharp, sibilant *sssh*. The flashlight beam probed the ceiling of the dead end, picking out the jagged hole where the ceiling had collapsed while Carl was under it. Bits of plaster drifted down as they watched.

Amos swept the beam along the corridor, exposing doors on either side and Carl's footprints down the middle. "Just so we know where we're going," he confided before turning off the flash. The two raced to the door at the end, heard it scream as Amos kicked it open, and then they were in the alley.

The street lights were out, as was to be expected, but even in the darkness keeping to the sidewalk was no problem. Then after a while shapes began

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to distinguish themselves. They stepped up the pace.

"You sure this Zachary Taylor High School is their HQ?"

"You're the one who told me it had to be the place. Don't you know? I thought you were the C.I.A. agent."

"Military Intelligence. And I don't know everything."

"Then take your word for it. That's their HQ."

The streets were empty and quiet. Carl had not realized just how much everyday noise he blocked out normally: traffic, kids at play, radios and tvs and stereos, even the humming of telephone lines. Now all was still. Around them nothing moved. In a deserted city they were the only travelers.

"This is taking forever," muttered Amos. "You know what a wolf trot is?"

"Sure. I read. A hundred paces running, a hundred walking."

"Let's do it."

Then it was run, walk, run, walk, until Carl felt his legs knotting up and the back of his shirt clammy with sweat. He envied the effortless ease with which Amos kept up the pace, never faltering, never slowing down, not even sweating. Walk, run, walk, run . . . until Carl's lungs ached with every ragged breath. He stopped in a doorway, gasping.

"I can't do it," he said when Amos turned back to him. "I'm just not in shape."

Amos made a disgusted noise. "Yeah, I was wondering when you'd hang it up. I'll go see what I can find. You stay here."

Two minutes later a Corvette with lights out glided silently up to Carl. "Don't tell me you learned how to hotwire cars in Basic Training," he said as he got in.

"Sure," Amos replied. "What do you think, I learned it in the ghetto?"

"I didn't even know we had a ghetto."

"We don't. I'm from Chicago."

Amos drove like a maniac, roaring through the streets with only the stars to light the way, whipping around corners without down-shifting . . . . Carl yelled: "Are you crazy? All this noise will bring every patrol in town down on us!"

"Do you see any patrols?"

"No-o."

"Do you hear any patrols?"

"How can I with all the racket you're making?"

Amos slowed the Corvette so the engine's roar muted to a hum. "That better?"

"Some."

"Hear any patrols now?"

"No. But that doesn't mean–"

"Anyway, aren't we wearing enemy uniforms?"

"Yeah, but–"

"Then what are you worried about?"

"Getting killed before we get there."

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Ten minutes later, at a slower, quieter speed, they got there. Once they were close enough to make out figures among the lights that lit the school and its outer perimeter, Amos pulled the car to the side of the road and he and Carl got out. "Are those lights going to be a problem?" said Carl as he slung a rifle over each shoulder. "Are we going to have to shoot them out?"

"We do that and right away they'll know something is up. Maybe on the way out." Besides carrying rifles and ammunition, Amos wore a pistol stuck into his belt. From a back pocket, he pulled out a screwdriver and a length of piano wire wound around wooden rods at either end. To Carl's querulous look he explained, "Guns are too noisy, at least until we lose the element of surprise."

They agreed to eliminate any soldiers guarding the lights, then enter the school, pretending to be Coalition troops, and from there play it by ear. Carl had serious misgivings about the credibility of such a plan but feeling a lack of expertise, he kept his doubts to himself. Maybe it would work, after all. Maybe it really would.

"One thing before we go," said Amos, "because it's been puzzling me ever since you told me about this place. Why here? Why an old high school out here?"

"This whole area was condemned when they decided to put an interstate highway through it. Then the federal funds got frozen, but they'd already torn down most of the houses and built a new school on the other side of town. After a while it became easier to ignore the problem than to try and do something about it. That's government for you, no offense."

"I'm sorry I asked. Okay, let's go."

Weeds choked vacant lots that had once held houses with lush lawns. Streets lay cracked and broken from the abuse of too much heavy machinery passing over them. The fence topped with barbed wire that enclosed the school had long since been violated; whole segments were missing. Amos and Carl crouched beside a huge hole in the fence and watched a guard amble past. As soon as he had passed, Amos leaped up and, screwdriver in hand, launched himself at the guard's back. Carl heard a brief gurgle. The guard slumped and Amos returned, wiping the screwdriver. Carl shuddered.

Two more guards were disposed of in the same way, Carl watching in horror while Amos did the dirty work. They left the bodies in the shadows. The killings brought them around to the front of the school, where they spied yet another guard trudging back and forth just beyond the glare of the lights. "You want to take him?" offered Amos in a whisper. "You got to do it some time."

Carl thought about Amy and the kids. "Okay," he said at length. "How should it be done?"

"Try this." Amos handed him the screwdriver. "Just jam it into his ear as far as it will go."

Carl waited until the guard swung back. He ran forward on tiptoe, carrying the screwdriver underhand, like a knife. He hooked his arm around the soldier's neck, digging under the chin and gripping the soldier's right shoul-

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der. He brought up his right hand and held the point of the screwdriver level with the soldier's ear. He hesitated. This wasn't the same as the struggle with Wheeler. That had been a matter of life or death, kill or be killed. This was, plain and simple, murder. He didn't think he could do it.

His intended victim changed his mind. A blow from the guard's fist caught Carl in the side, just under the ribs. Another blow landed in the same place, and then the guard was trying to stomp on his toes. These unfair actions angered Carl to action. He jabbed the screwdriver in deep and hard, heard bones crunch and snap, felt blood gush warmly up the shank and over the handle and onto his hand. The guard coughed, choked, gurgled, lost all powers of resistance, drooped forward, sagged to the ground.

Carl looked at the corpse, looked away, forced himself to look back, felt his stomach rising and dropping and rising again in protest. He staggered off to the shadows and was violently sick.

A little later, a little weaker, he reflected that this was indeed war. And in war, anger was the least important reason for killing. You killed to stay alive. Carl resolved that he would stay alive.

Meanwhile Amos dragged the body deeper into the darkness. On his return Carl joined him and the two stepped boldly into the light. It seemed no one was left to challenge them, though that did not prevent Carl from glancing furtively behind him as they mounted the broad steps to the doors. The lights were dazzling. Carl felt exposed.

"Come on," hissed Amos. "The place looks deserted."

Not quite. Bare bulbs strung every twenty feet or so along a hastily rigged wire shone dimly down on a dusty floor, disturbed by the tramping of many booted feet. Muffled thuds sounded from the second floor above. On a wall of the foyer was painted the Coalition symbol, a yellow circle quartered in red and black. At the end of the foyer was a doorless office and a corridor stretching right and left on either side.

"You know the layout," said Amos. "Fill me in."

"To our right," said Carl, pointing, "the auditorium. To our left the gymnasium. Classrooms on both floors, though I doubt there's anything left in them now. Stairs at either end."

"Let's check out the auditorium."

Not wanting to appear hurried or awkward or out of place, they walked at a casual pace. Carl glimpsed into doorless classrooms as they passed, seeing cartons filling one room, another empty but for the remnants of a fire that had burned a great black patch on the floor, another containing a couple of soldiers who looked incuriously at them, another occupied by a crude bed and the bed occupied by a big man with a bandaged head, another with an officer in it sitting at a small table and reading over some paperwork, and another, and another, and then they had reached the auditorium, the doors of which were surprisingly still intact.

"This could be where it gets heavy," murmured Amos, laying his hand on the door. "You ready?" Carl nodded assent. Amos pulled the door open.

From behind them came a strangled cry: "Stop that man! Stop him! Stop

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him!''

Carl and Amos exchanged desperate looks. Without looking into the auditorium, Amos let the door shut and pressed his hand against it.

Carl had briefed Amos long before on the matter of the blue pickup truck and his experience with its driver. Now, as the yells grew louder, the image of the big man with the bandaged head suddenly surfaced in his thoughts, and he summed up the cause of the yells in one word. ''Wheeler.''

''Oh, shit,'' said Amos. He grabbed Carl's elbow and hustled him into the nearest classroom, one of the empties. ''Don't go anywhere,'' he instructed Carl, and stuck his head out the doorway. His body followed and he disappeared from view, only to return a few seconds later. ''We are in trouble,'' he announced, checking his weapons for full ammunition clips, getting battle–ready, getting out a grenade and hefting it in his hand.

One word was sufficient to explain why. ''Wheeler,'' Carl said again.

''Right,'' said Amos. ''Our only chance of making it now is to shut up your songbird friend before he costs us both our lives. That's your job.''

''Mine? What are you gonna do?''

Amos held up the grenade, looking at it affectionately as if it were a ripe apple. ''You want to get to Wheeler, so I'm creating a diversion to make sure you get there, is all. Here,'' he said, tossing Carl the wooden–handled length of piano wire. ''Don't shoot him, he's not worth it.''

''Where will you be?''

''I'll be in the auditorium for a while. You stick around here after you get rid of Wheeler until I get back. Right now you wait until everyone goes by, then you go get Wheeler. Got it?''

''Got it. Just don't get killed.''

''I won't if you won't.''

''You got a deal.''

Carl crossed to the other side of the doorway and stood with his back hard against the wall. Out of sight of anyone else, he had an unobstructed view of the auditorium doors. Wheeler was still yelling, though his cries were getting weaker. Amos popped his head out, then nonchalantly walked to the auditorium doors, pulled the pin on the grenade. His mouth moved in silent counting. He opened the door a crack, tossed in the grenade, turned to the wall with his hands over his ears. There was a loud *boom!* One of the doors fell down.

Amos was running the other way now, yelling ''Intrus! Intrus!'' which Carl assumed was French for *intruder*. Then Amos ran back, followed by four or five soldiers, one of whom was probably the officer. Or so Carl hoped.

Carl placed one hand on the doorframe and swung out into the corridor. Behind him was shouting and shooting and the thuds of many boots. Ahead came only Wheeler's ''Stop him! Stop him!'' like a broken record. Carl unwound the wire and snapped it taut between his hands. He found the right doorway, stood in it, stared at Wheeler.

Wheeler stared back. Even as his voice faded away his jaw kept working,

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trying for sounds that never came. His lips shaped a single syllable that might have been *Who* or *How* but came out as neither. It was a feeble, pathetic sound.

Carl felt only disgust for the big man. He held the wire up and Wheeler's eyes moved to it, widened, shifted back to Carl's face. Carl took a step forward. Wheeler's eyes were truly remarkable now. Framed by bandages above and below, they expressed a sequence of horror, fear, anger, defiance, and resignation; then they dulled, staring at the wire again as though it were a line drawn in the dust and Wheeler a mesmerized chicken.

Carl was not fooled. He saw Wheeler's hands stealing up the gray blanket, obviously reaching for a concealed weapon. But one more step brought him to Wheeler's side. He put a stop to the man's furtive action by calmly and coldly pressing down on the bandaged nose with his thumb. Wheeler yelped. Blood began blotting the dingy gauze.

"You'll never get away with this," croaked Wheeler. All the fight had gone out of him, except for his mouth. "Anyway, it's too late. I saw them bring your wife and kids in. Real cute family. I also saw them shot." Then he gulped, realizing his mistake.

"Then there's no point in keeping you alive, is there?" said Carl, moving behind Wheeler and looping the wire around his neck. He crossed the handles and pulled as tight as he could. Wheeler scrabbled his hands at his throat for a second or two, then gave up. His body jerked once, twice.

Carl maintained his grip on the wire long after it ceased to matter, long after Wheeler ceased to be. He didn't see Wheeler die, his eyes were too full of tears for that. He saw only the faces of Amy and Cheryl and Jimmy and his heart cried out. No. No. No. Wheeler had to have lied. He had to have lied. He had to.

Otherwise what was the point of Carl staying alive?

Carl's awareness returned when an explosion seemed to shake the building. All the lights went out. He released his hold on the garrote around Wheeler's neck and stood in the darkness, listening to far-off gunfire and the distant screams of the wounded. Amos must be doing one hell of a job, he thought, and wondered if he should go and help.

He walked down the corridor, counting doorways as his hand slapped them. Reaching the classroom where Amos had left him, he took three steps inside the room, froze, then hastily backed out as quietly as he could.

He had seen the red glow of a burning cigarette and smelled tobacco. Someone was in there? Amos?

He couldn't remember having seen Amos smoke.

He could spray the room with bullets, but what if it *was* Amos in there? What if it was a civilian held prisoner? What if . . .? Trapped by indecision, he stayed where he was and waited.

He took his pulse and counted to 100.

He noticed that his night vision had returned. He could see. Dimly.

He remembered that he had left his weapons in the empty classroom.

The realization came that he was being stupid. If someone was in the room

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smoking a cigarette then, with his night vision, he should be able to glimpse the face as that person took a puff. If nothing else, perhaps he could overpower the person. Then he'd feel safe, for the time being.

Into the room he ventured, hardly daring to breathe. The glow was still there, and as he drew closer he expected a momentary brightness to reveal the face of the smoker.

There was no momentary brightness.

He hunkered down and began making circles on the floor with his fingertips, hoping to find his rifle.

Then the smoker took a puff, the face was lit up, and a voice said, "Make any more moves and I blow your head off." The accent was German. The voice was contralto. He heard the click of a pistol being cocked.

That was it, it was all over, he was a dead man.

"Okay if I talk?" he said. What the hell, there was nothing left to lose.

"If it amuses you."

She must have taken both his rifles. They were probably over in the corner, next to her. There was no way he could get them.

"You're Eva Obendrein, right?"

"If you say so."

"Earlier today you captured a woman and two children who were riding in a blue pickup truck."

"If you say so."

"Where are they?"

He heard the woman make a sharp intake of breath. "What matter is that to you?" she said after a time.

Carl waited a shorter time before replying. "I'm her husband."

"Ah. Of course. You came with the cavalry, hoping to rescue them. What a pity you are too late."

His scalp tightened. "What do you mean?"

If there had been light, he would have seen her shrug. "They are no longer here. All have been sent to a detention camp until their guilt has been determined. Who knows, they may be innocent. If so, they will live. But you will die."

They were alive. They were alive.

Eva Obendrein crushed her cigarette and struck a match to light another. Carl remembered to close one eye in time to preserve a little of his night vision. In the abrupt glare he saw the woman clearly. She was sitting on the floor with her back propped up against the wall under a boarded window. Where she clutched her side, blood had seeped through and spread on the floor until it caked in the dust. That she had put the pistol down to light the match, thus giving Carl a clear opportunity to rush her, no longer meant anything. Eva Obendrein was dying.

"Where is this detention camp?"

"Hundreds of miles away. Near Chicago." Her voice was growing fainter.

"How near?"

A beam of light sprang from the doorway, shining full on Eva Obendrein.

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Her chin snapped up and she raised the gun shakily and squeezed the trigger. The hammer came down on nothing with a loud click. The gun was empty.

The flashlight beam shifted to Carl. "You okay?" said Amos.

Carl smiled without mirth. "Yeah. You?" He kept his eyes on Eva as he bent over her and picked up the rifles. She looked back weakly and her eyes were very old.

"I broke a fingernail," said Amos, "but I'll live. Let's get out of here."

"What about Eva Obendrein?"

They heard shouts and running, getting louder.

"Eva? We both know where she's going. Come on, let's get out of here. It sounds like we're about to have company."

Carl led the way through the dark corridor and out through the foyer. Amos lagged behind to let loose a salvo of bullets that obliterated the Coalition symbol painted on the wall. Carl set his rifle on automatic fire and raked the lights that lit the school from outside, plunging the building into an exterior darkness to match the interior. The pair clattered down the steps but did not head straight out as Carl expected. Amos steered him left.

"Where are you going?" puffed Carl. "We have to get to Chicago. You heard her say that my family was there."

"I heard. But let's finish the job here first."

They rounded a corner of the gymnasium, rounded another. One lone guard fired a burst at them that missed, and Carl wiped him out without a second thought. On the football field, under the stars, the tank stood. Amos and Carl zigzagged toward it, shooting constantly, but it was unguarded.

Amos clambered on top of the tread. "This is your standard M60 tank," he said. "Stand away from it and give me about 45 seconds. Then watch the fireworks." He opened a hatch on the turret and climbed inside.

With a deep whirr of engines, the turret swung the cannon around until it pointed at the school. Carl stepped off to the side and held his ears. The cannon fired with a roar, telescoping into itself with the recoil.

The noise was deafening. Where the cannon had aimed, the wall exploded, flinging debris high into the air. The cannon swung and fired again, swung again and fired. The school appeared to bend in on itself, as if a giant hand had pulled its strings from inside. The blast of the explosions echoed all around, then faded into stillness.

The turret hatch popped open and Amos emerged. Carl forgot he was covering his ears until Amos climbed down and pulled Carl's hands away. "You okay?" he asked loudly.

"Sure," said Carl. "I'm not even deaf."

Amos leaned against the tank and stared at the rubble. He whistled softly between his teeth.

"What are we standing around for? Chicago, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. I was just admiring my handiwork. Let's go find the Corvette. We've got a lot of ground to cover before morning."

–Gil Lamont

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STAR WARRIORS

By Jesse Peele

PART 2

VIII

The mists didn't exactly roll away–it was the pain from the burn on his shoulder which told him he was still alive. That, and the cool air on his naked body . . . .

Naked body?

Painfully, Dal managed to raise his throbbing head and force his eyes open. Hmm. He was lying on his back, on a cushioned table that was soft against his bare skin, and son-of-a-bitch, he *was* naked. Not a thing on!

He let his head fall back–that was a mistake because the throbbing which had only been terrible inside his aching skull suddenly got worse. Where was he? How had he gotten here? The last thing he remembered was throwing his empty ceepee gun at a dive-bombing drone. He ought to be deader than black plastic!

"Awake at last, I see," said a voice from his right. It was a deep, honey–on–glass–smooth voice, a female voice. He decided he liked it.

So he tried to sit up. Whoops. There was something he hadn't noticed before–his wrists and ankles were strapped down!

"You and I are going to have a wonderful time," the woman said. He managed to twist his head, and–

Yep. There she was–the tall, red-haired lady in green, moving closer. Dal tried to smile. Too bad the wind wasn't blowing.

The smell of her perfume was nice; a heavy, musky scent, and she seemed to glide across the thick carpet like a dancer.

When she was a meter away, she stopped. Her full, red lips pulled back into a sensual smile. Slowly, she reached to a clasp at her neck. She pulled the silver metal apart with a tiny click, threw back her shoulders,

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and–

The robe slithered down her body to the floor.

Dal's mouth got dry. The woman was wonderfully, beautifully, fantastically nude!

The tips of her hard nipples couldn't be that color, he decided–that had to be rouge. Her long, red hair fanned out over her shoulders and fell almost to her buttocks. She shifted her hips slightly, and the small muscles in her slim belly danced under her smooth skin. The line of her ribs pressed gently outward, accentuating the thin waist. Below that waist was her navel, and beneath that, a thin, red–and–curly line of hair began to swirl downward into a thicker–

Dal's mouth got very, very dry. He realized some of the throbbing in his head had subsided. Well. He knew where the pounding blood had gone–other things were beginning to throb . . . .

"You're a very brave man," she said, bending over to touch her moist lips lightly to his chest. "I like brave men." She bit lightly and smiled up at him. This close, Dal could see the whirling, too–gray color of her large, beautiful eyes.

So. It was the Lady with Smoke Eyes–the Lady Ursula!

And, don't forget, the wife of Lord Kreeg Hookthorn!

She kissed him on the chest again, and still smiling, she slid the long nails of her right hand inside his left knee. She worked her fingers back and forth, scratching in small circles on his skin as her hand moved upward. . . .

Umm. Oh, yeah. . . . .

Hey! a voice inside his mind yelled at him. This is the enemy! The wife of the guy who shot your ship down!

Go away, he told the inner voice.

Wait! Listen! Don't you remember the *Starbird?*

The who? Ahhh.

Idiot! What about the stories? About what she does to her lovers *afterward?*

The thick, red hair fell lightly across his body as the woman kissed him fully on the lips, her tongue probing.

Afterward? Who the hell cares about afterward? Gods, if only I could get my hands loose!

That's the spirit, said the voice. You could get away!

Get away? You're crazy! What I need my hands for is–wait. Just a minute. There *was* something he seemed to remember, something about the Lady with Smoke Eyes–what was it . . .?

Oh. Now he remembered. Oh, shit!

Yeah, dummy, said the voice inside his head. She's supposed to chop 'em up afterward, and eat part of 'em! Wanna guess which part she eats?

Yeah, well, that was terrible and all, but the woman's body was sliding slickly against his now, her breathing hot against his ear, the musk of her perfume filling his nostrils. Even if he wanted to stop–which he didn't–he *was* tied . . .!

"Ursula!" roared a deep voice from somewhere nearby.

The woman lifted her face from Dal's slightly. "Shhh," she whispered. "Maybe he won't–"

"Ursula! Where the hell are you?" The sound was definitely closer.

"Oh, damn!" She looked down at Dal's muscular body, at the evidence of his desire for her. "Too bad," she

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said with a sigh. "In here!" she yelled.

"Who–?" Dal managed to croak.

"Kreeg. He's always spoiling my fun!"

Kreeg? Oh. Kreeg. *Lord* Kreeg. Hookthorn.

My boy, you are in deep shit!

And the throbbing in his head started back up as more blood became available from another source; as Dal's desire wilted like a paper flower in a hurricane.

The door to the dimly lit room opened, and the lights flared on brightly–much too brightly.

Lord Kreeg Hookthorn. All two meters and one–hundred–and–ten kilos of him, blocking out almost the whole entrance. He was dressed in the legendary black uniform he supposedly always wore. Thick, brown and curly hair sprouted from his squarish head, and the heavy beard was shot through with streaks of lighter gray. His teeth gleamed whitely against the darkness of his facial hair when he smiled.

"I hate to break up your little party–but there's an intruder loose on the base. The stupid Division Commander said he'd been trapped in this area and hit by a clone-drone–but nobody can find the body." He stopped, and looked at Dal, then back at his wife. "Who's your friend, Ursula? He doesn't look familiar."

"He's mine! You said I could have anybody I wanted, anytime!" She glared at Hookthorn, legs spread wide, her hands on her bare hips.

"Aha! So that's where the bastard went! *You* got him! I should have known."

"Kreeg, you *said*–"

"You can have him back. Later . . . after I've finished with him."

"After you get through with him, there won't be anything left worth having. There never is."

Oh, fine, Dal thought. Not just deep–you're in a mountain of it!

"Your story stinks!"

So did Hookthorn's breath, but Dal didn't mention that.

"You say you outflew twelve of my ships, *alone*, landed that wreck and survived? And then you crossed a thousand kilometers of jungle and wandered onto a guarded military base?"

"I've always been lucky."

Hookthorn backhanded Dal across the face, rocking his already painful head and bringing a bright red flush to one cheek. "Not any more. Your luck just expired! You're going to tell me who sent you, and how you knew I was on this world. And a lot of other information you probably didn't even realize you knew. And then, if you're lucky, I might let you die."

Dal's mouth hurt, but he managed a grin–a small one. "Well, if I have to go, I'd prefer your wife's method–"

Hookthorn slapped him again. "We'll see how smart you are in a little while!" Hookthorn turned and stalked over to a com panel. "Get the goddamned medic over here!"

There was a two-second pause. "Uh . . . sir, he's . . . gone into town . . . ."

Hookthorn glared at the com. "Well, find him! I want him here in fifteen minutes! If he's not, *you* will personally scrape entry–burn from the nose of every ship in the fleet!"

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"Yes, sir! He'll be there!"

"How the hell am I going to conquer a galaxy when I'm surrounded by idiots?"

"Tough to get good help," Dal said.

★

The whitecoated psychomech pushed in a cart covered with glittery things–things Dal didn't want to look too closely at; he had a feeling he'd find out their function soon enough.

The man was short, fat, and had an almost cherubic smile. He also smelled of alcohol–the medical kind. And like something which ought to be preserved in a jar somewhere.

"I want to know everything he learned since he was potty-trained. And I want to know it quickly!"

"Of course, Lord," the fat man said. "If you'd care to return in, say, half an hour, I'm sure I'll be finished by then."

Hookthorn grinned. "Well! A man who knows his job! What a change. I'll be back in half an hour."

After he left, the fat medic moved toward Dal, holding a card in his chubby hand. "First, a simple test. Look at this."

Dal glared at the card. He'd be damned if he was going to cooperate.

But the card said, "Don't say anything. Just play along. The room is probably monitered."

Dal nodded.

"Good, good. Now, we must have your complete relaxation. I realize that will be somewhat hard for you to do voluntarily, under the circumstances. However, I will give you an injection of nospas, and–" he stopped.

"Excuse me, when did you last urinate?"

"Huh? I don't remember. A few hours ago."

"Um. Won't do, I'm afraid. The nospas will relax the bladder sphincter muscles. Messy." He turned to the door.

"Guard!"

The portal dilated a fraction. "Yeah?"

"This man isn't ready for therapy. He's got to go to the bathroom."

"What?"

"The bathroom. This man has got to go!"

"Look, uh . . . doc . . . ."

"Doctor Bone, doctor C'min al-Bone. Open the portal!"

"I was told not to let anybody–"

"Lord Hookthorn is going to be returning in less than thirty minutes, expecting to find this man ready to

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answer his questions. What do you think he'll do to you when I tell him *you* wouldn't let me prepare my patient to answer those questions?''

''Uh, well, yeah, I guess he can go to the head. But I'll haveta come with you!''

The medic looked at the gray ceiling, apparently bored. ''Whatever.''

The guard dilated the door and stepped inside, his particle spitter held at the ready.

''Take him along,'' Dr. Bone said. ''I'll be right along behind you–I've got to check out my encephalo–stunner.''

The guard nudged Dal with his weapon, and Dal stumbled toward the portal, feeling very clumsy with his hands tied behind him. The thin, syntho–silk straps cut into his wrists; he could feel his hands getting numb.

Thwack! There was a sound behind him like a melon dropped onto a tile floor. Dal spun, to see the guard falling, the medic holding a heavy chunk of machinery. The fat man grinned. ''Had to test the encephalo–stunner–seems it works just fine!'' Then the medic's form became a blur . . . .

It must be Lin . . . . No! It was–Lao Emba!

''How did–?''

''Never mind. I couldn't hold the mind–form any longer. Let's get out of here.'' He pulled the knife he carried on his thigh from its clear scabbard and deftly cut the bindings on Dal's wrists. Dal's hands burned as the blood came back into them.

''What about the bugs . . .?''

In answer, an alarm began to squeal.

''Move, boy, dammit, move!''

Dal moved. ''Which way?''

''There! I've got a vehicle waiting outside the south perimeter.''

''What about the fence? It's laser-rigged.''

''Don't worry! Just move your butt! Now!''

''Sometime you'll have to teach me some of those Ch'an tricks.''

''Later, boy, later!''

Somehow, they reached the fence. On the other side was a large air–cushion car. But the fence.

Emba sang several bars–in Trogian.

The thick, green brush seemed to burst open as Tulak appeared. He was carrying a log nearly as big around as he was. With seeming ease, he hoisted the log by one end, and let it fall forward onto the fence.

The lasers flashed, and the massive log burst into flame, charring into smelly, resin–popping smoke.

But the weight was too much–the chain–link steel bent, bowed, and–gave! The automatic lasers continued to roast the log, but there were gaps around it that were large enough.

''Duck!'' screamed a raspy voice.

Dal dropped, and a thin beam of high–energy crackled over his head. With his face lifted slightly from the dirt, he saw Lincheni standing on the opposite side of the fence next to Tulak. The Demi—Whelf crouched and fired his own particle spitter. There was a gurgling yell behind Dal as Lin's shot struck its mark.

''Boy,'' Emba said, '' do I have to tell you–''

But Dal was up and moving. He jumped through a gap in the torn fence, just missing one of the still-firing laser beams.

Tulak was already in the car, along with Lin, who was sending his furry

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hands flying over the controls.

"You don't know how happy I am to see you!" Dal gasped.

"I could hazard a guess," Lin said, grinning.

"Pursuit approaches," Tulak sang. "I suggest we depart."

The air car sprang as if goosed, and Dal felt himself pulled back into the seat by the acceleration.

To his left, Emba glared at him. "Listen, fool! The next time you go flitting off without my permission, I will leave your ass to rot! Understood?"

Dal nodded. Yeah. That didn't seem like such bad advice.

X

"You're kind of stupid, you know that?" Tanya said. She had changed from the sleeping robe into a one-piece blue jump—suit. The thicker cloth hid her shape better than the robe, but not much–a fact of which Dal was almost painfully aware. He was beginning to feel like a long-time celibate.

The girl's pretty face was angry looking. "You could have blown everything with that stunt!"

"Everything? *What* everything? Why, if Hookthorn found out that an old man, a girl, a robot, a Demi-Whelf and I intended to destroy his navy, he'd have been terrified."

"If he didn't laugh himself to death," Lin added.

Emba looked at Tanya, then at Dal. "Okay, Harusun, I admit we haven't told you everything."

"My! What a surprise! Doesn't that surprise you, Lin? Why, I'll bet even Tulak is surprised."

"Negative," chimed Tulak. "I am not–"

"Never mind!" Dal glared at the robot. "You haven't told us *anything!* Either we know what's going on, or you can shove this whole thing up your–"

"All right," Emba said. "There is a plan . . . ."

★

"That's your plan?" Dal said, amazed. He looked at Lin.

"Well," Lin said, "it is better than just five of us. Not much better, maybe, but. . . ."

"What's the matter, Harusun?" Tanya asked. "Don't you think you can do your part?"

"It's not that! It's just–"

"I told you," she said to Emba. "I knew we couldn't depend on this–this pirate."

"Listen, sweetheart, Lin, Tulak and I can fly figure eights around any one of Hookthorn's ships. Against any five ships! But we can't beat a dozen–ship patrol!"

"You don't have to defeat them," Emba said. "Just keep them busy."

"Oh, fine! What happens when another fifty ships flame up to help out? The only thing they'll be busy doing is figuring out how to sponge our remains up from the landscape!"

"The base will have troubles of its own."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. You and the snakes will be destroying it. Sure!"

Emba and Tanya looked at each other. "I think it's time you met Snegala," the old man said.

Tanya nodded, and grinned.

★

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From the air, the weedpatch still looked like an iron wheatfield. Emba landed the flitter in a clearing, and the five passengers alighted.

As they approached the edge of the weed, Emba spoke into a small transceiver.

Sweat formed and ran down inside Dal's tunic.

The jungle air was too damp with humidity for the moisture on his body to evaporate. The smell of the too-thick foliage was oppressively sweet and decaying. They misnamed this planet, Dal thought. They should have called it 'rotten.'

A clinking sound vibrated through the weed. The sound increased, until it was like a hammer on thin sheet metal. Then–

Son-of-a-bitch. Dal stared at the *thing* that pushed the iron stems aside easily as it slithered into the clearing!

It was basically snake–like in shape, in that it was long and tube-like–a good five meters long, and as big around as Dal's thigh. But it didn't look like any snake Dal had ever seen.

First, the head was all wrong–the thing's mouth opened from side–to–side, like a crab's claw, instead of up and down, like a snake. There didn't seem to be any teeth; instead, there were razorsharp plates lining both sides. Logically, that made sense–if the Culebrath snipped the iron–weed, it wouldn't have to turn its head to do so.

Along both sides of the creature's body, there were rows of hook–like fins, each fingerthick, and perhaps ten centimeters long. When the creature lifted its head slightly, Dal could see a similar row of spikes. An interesting method of locomotion. In the weed, they could hook the fins around the stalks. On the ground, they could dig those under–fins into the ground and pull.

Its skin seemed metallic. There were segments every few centimeters along its length which seemed to be some kind of joint. The creature was basically a dull gray color, with flecks of fire red scattered over it. There were no eyes Dal could see–maybe it used a sonar or radar for 'seeing.' There were two small holes on top of the head which could have been nostrils.

"I can speak some Culebrath," Emba said, interrupting Dal's thoughts. "But Snegala can understand and speak basic Interspeak, as well."

Emba moved closer to the creature on the ground. "Snegala, these be friends."

Snegala gargled, a high, quavering sound. "I be happy meeting friends."

"Does he know what you've got planned?" Dal asked.

"Yes. He and his people are willing to help."

"Pardon me," Lin said, "but he doesn't look very mobile. *Can* they help?"

Emba nodded. "Can show friends eat thing, Snegala?"

"Can show."

Tanya stepped forward. She was holding a large metal bar, heavy from the look of it, as thick as Dal's wrist. She stood the bar on its end in front of the Culebrath. It wasn't balanced well, however, and it started to fall.

Before the bar had tipped more than a few degrees, Snegala lunged–incredibly fast–and clamped his cross-jaws onto it. Chink! Suddenly there were two small pieces of

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bar lying on the ground! But more than half the thick metal was . . . gone!

Eaten.

Before Dal could speak, Emba did. "Be okay show friends gun–thing?"

"Be okay."

Emba turned to Lin. "Can I borrow your weapon?"

Lin nodded, and handed it to him.

Dal looked puzzled. Was it going to *eat* the gun . . .?

But Emba turned back to Snegala and without pausing, he fired the spitter at the prone creature!

"Hey!" Dal yelled.

Emba ignored him. The stream of deadly particles hit Snegala about mid–body. Emba played the green line back and forth over the Culebrath for about two seconds before he stopped. There was a hot metal stink, like an ore furnace. The ground around the Culebrath smouldered and made little popping noises.

"How you be feeling?" Emba asked.

"Be feeling okay."

"Be damaged?"

"No."

Dal and Lin stared at each other. The Demi–Whelf shrugged his hairy shoulders. Damn! Tulak could take a hit from a ceepee and survive–but he was a robot! Snegala didn't seem to be bothered at all!

"Uh, how is he against a laser?" Dal finally managed to ask.

"Not as good. After a few seconds of standard anti–personnel laser fire, he gets uncomfortable."

Uncomfortable? Shit! Even Tulak couldn't take laser fire without damage!

"Well?" Tanya said, smiling broadly at Dal.

"Uh. Well. Um." Even his hands were sweaty now.

Lin scratched at his belly–fur. "Got to admit a few of his friends could cause a stir coming across a compound toward you."

"Snegala says he will have eight hundred of his brothers ready to hit the military base in a week."

Well, Dal thought. That certainly would create a diversion at the base.

"Okay, so the base is busy. And the three of us play dodge–rocket with Hookthorn's patrol–it'll still be close! You'll need a damned good pilot to sneak a ship into hyper during this raid. And it'll take him a month before he can get to a Confed base and back with enough help to take out Hookthorn!"

"It'll take *her* a month," Tanya said.

"What?"

"I'll be flying the message ship."

"You?"

"What's so amazing about that? I'm a good pilot."

"But–but–"

"When my father died, I automatically became a senator, as his only surviving relative. Besides, do you think the Confederation would believe *you* if you told them?"

"She has a point," Lincheni observed.

"You seem to forget something!" Dal said. "Even if everything goes as planned–which isn't all that likely–the basic problem Emba mentioned earlier still exists. What's to stop the Confed's navy from hell–bombing the whole planet?"

"Ah, a good point!" Emba said. "By the time Tanya gets back, we will have lured most of his ships off–planet. The Confederation ships

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will take them in space."

"Just how the hell do you plan to do that?"

Emba grinned. "Not me, my boy–us! There's a way."

Dal looked at Lin, then at the impassive facade of Tulak.

It seemed he'd heard that one before.

"I don't think I want to hear this," he said, feeling doomed.

But of course he heard it anyway.

X

Trees and smelly bushes, insects and heat. Even in the dark, now nearly midnight, the damned jungle was ungodly hot and sinus-congesting wet. If I ever get out of this, Dal thought, it will be a cold day in hell before I go to another tropical world!

Aloud, he said, "I told you, gate security will be too tight. This is the only way!"

"I don't see why we can't just steal a small flitter and hop the damned fence," Lin said. The heat seemed to be bothering him more than it did Dal–but then, that figured–fur coats were no help unless it was cold.

"Tell him, Tulak."

"The inner perimeter of the fence is equipped with automatic anti–aircraft weaponry. Any low-flying vehicle attempting entry over the fence would be fired upon."

"Yeah? Then what about your plan to leave when you were in earlier, Dal? You were going to fly out."

"I didn't know about it then. I'd have been roasted."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Tulak, you have the charges?" Stupid question. Of course he had them.

"Affirmative."

"I hope they work!" Lin rasped.

"The explosives are operational," Tulak sang.

"Yeah, but will they be strong enough to knock a hole in the fence *and* destroy the nearest lasers?"

"I have calculated that they will be sufficient."

Lin shook his head. In the dim moonlight, Dal could just barely see the gleam of the Demi–Whelf's eyes.

"So we just crash the fence, run like racelots with our tails on fire and pray, right?"

"You losing your nerve in your old age, Lin?" Dal grinned.

"No! I just hoped to be able to breed at least once before I *got* too old."

"Cheer up. The ship we want is less than a klick away! It's late, it's dark, there are three of us and only a few thousand of them. We'll make it!"

Lin looked up at the faint blue gleam from Tulak's face-slit. "What about Tulak? How fast–?"

"On a hundred-meter dash, he can spot me ten meters and still beat me by ten."

"Big deal! *I* can do that."

Dal chuckled. "When I'm running for my hide, you'd be surprised at how much faster I am."

They moved forward in the damp and smelly underbrush in a crouch. Just ahead, the pale moonlight reflected from the laser–trapped chain–link fence.

Dal looked at his chrono. "Two minutes. Get ready."

"Hey," Lin said, "just what is this diversion Emba has planned?"

"He didn't say–but he said we'd probably be able to see it. And he

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said we've got fifteen minutes to get set before Snegala and his brothers go to it."

The seconds hummed by slowly. The two minutes seemed like two thousand years–and yet only two seconds . . . .

"There!" Lin growled.

The three of them stared. They were on the south side of the compound. To the northeast, suddenly there was a light!

The night sky began to glow, in shades of red and blue and yellow. Then, in the midst of the colors, an image began to form . . . .

It was–a–a woman! A giant, holographic image of a—a *naked* woman! The shape was slender, with large breasts, and long, red hair . . . .

"Holy shit!" Dal said. "That's a picture of the Lady–"

"Come on!" Lin shouted. "It's supposed to distract the troops–not us!"

"Yeah, right!" But certain memories arose . . . .

Dal and Lin scuttled toward the fence. Tulak was setting the last of the charges, being careful not to touch the deadly wire.

To the northeast, the giant picture began gesturing obscenely. Dal could imagine what Hookthorn would be telling his men.

Kaboom! The explosion's concussion rocked Dal. His ears rang with the sound, and there was a burned, dusty smell. The fence was down–there was a gap a tank could move through.

They ran through the twisted fragments of still-smoking fence.

"Halt! Who's there?"

A guard! Dal increased his speed, and almost ran over Lincheni, just

ahead of him!

A bright, red beam lanced at them from behind and to the left. It missed Dal by less than a meter!

Without slowing, Dal drew the new ceepee spitter Emba had gotten him, and fired a quick blast of green energy at the guard. He missed, but the man dropped and began screaming for help.

Dal heard Lincheni curse, then a thump, like a falling body. What–?

Then his shin smashed into something hard, and he half–flipped into the air. He managed to tuck his shoulder and come up in a back-jarring roll–but his lower leg hurt like hell!

They rounded a dimly lit corner into the darkness between two featureless gray buildings.

"Bastard!" Dal said. "Why didn't you tell me there was something there to trip on?" He bent over to massage his swelling shin.

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Lin was still cursing, rubbing at the front of his own furry thigh. "When did I have time? You were digging blisters on my heels!" He resumed cursing.

"Tulak? Did you miss the obstruction?"

"I went through it," Tulak said. "It was merely a wooden rail, probably placed there in order to–"

"Never mind!" All Dal needed was a lecture on the mechanical construction of a military base.

The three moved forward past the looming buildings, until they were at the edge of the landing field.

Here were rows and rows of black–hulled ships: fighters, tankers, troop–carriers, supply vessels–a small navy. Most of these had rudimentary aerodynamic hulls, being both space and atmosphere craft.

"Come on," Dal said. "This way."

The three skulked through the dimly lit area, watching for additional guards. The sky to the northeast was growing darker–Emba's hologram was fading–they'd have to hurry!

The smell of reactor damping was strong here, mixed with the smells of various oils and gases. It took ten minutes for them to locate the ship.

"Oh, wow!" Lin rasped. "Look at that mother!"

The ship sat alone in a cleared area. It was a black, flattened oval, easily twice the size of the dead *Starbird*. Thin tail and side fins jutted from the craft, which was set in a position of lift–off.

It was a Styne-Allison Fighter–the fastest and most deadly piece of equipment ever designed by mankind for space warfare! While the rest of Hookthorn's rag–tag navy was composed of standard ships–Henry and Cither class cruisers, Boeingheed Battlewagons and Lazney Lancers, this ship was nearly unique! There were perhaps two hundred such ships operational in the entire Galaxy. It cost a planet's ransom, and in battle, was damned well worth it!

Around the base of the sleek ship were at least six armed guards.

"Doesn't look like they want anybody to borrow it," Lin said.

"Probably not–it's Hookthorn's personal baby!

"So how do we get it? Walk up and ask?"

Dal grinned. "Simple. Tulak will back off a little and give 'em a hundred decibels of 'A' above high 'C.' You and I will sneak up behind them."

"Mad," Lin muttered. "All Earthies are mad."

"What?"

"Nothing. We sneak up behind them."

When they heard the ear–drilling squeal of Tulak's tone, three of the guards immediately took off to find the source of the sound. That left only three to watch the ship.

Dal kicked one of the remaining men smack on the side of the head with a roundhouse kick which would have made his old Oppugnate sensei proud–the man went down as if a rug had been jerked from under him.

Lin shot the other two with his spitter.

"You got no class, Lincheni!"

"Yeah? You want to play martial artist, fine! Me, I want to stay alive!"

The high–pitched wail stopped, as if a switch had been snapped off. A few seconds later, Tulak's massive frame came into view, dim light shin-

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ing from his tall silver form.

"The other guards . . .?" Lin asked.

"They fired on me," Tulak said.

Dal nodded. The big robot wasn't allowed to use any weapons but his own body, and then only in self–defense. But Dal remembered the attack of the rhino–thing after they'd first landed on this world–and the broken skull Tulak had dealt it with one fist!

"Come on, let's get on board!"

★

"Can you fly this thing?" Lin asked. "It looks pretty complicated."

"I can fly it! Can you figure out how to operate the comp and the weapons–systems?"

Lin looked insulted. "If a human can design it, a whelf can run it!"

"Tulak?"

The big robot wasialready seated in the too-small-for-him navigator/power control section. His answer ran out over the comp. "The controls are simple; I can operate them with no difficulty."

"Dammit! We've got our ship!"

"Yeah," Lin said sourly, "now all we have to do is get away with it!"

Dal looked at his chrono. "Emba's got the Culebrath hitting the fences in five minutes."

Four minutes passed. Three minutes. Two. One.

"Move it!" Dal yelled.

Tulak punched in take–off power. Dal tapped in the launch pattern.

They were off! Even in the akcel–couches, the G–pull was chest mashing. "Man, oh, man, has this thing got power!"

Almost instantly it seemed, they were in space.

Next to Dal, Lin chortled.

"Look at this! This thing's got ceepee cannons, lasers, proximity mines, cobalt torpedoes, the works! And the computer! It's a fully programmed MJ–Reefer–Single–Hit system! Fantastic!"

Three minutes out, Dal turned to look at Lin. "Okay. We've got our ship–the ship the bastards owed us!"

"And then some!" Lin rasped, his fingers dancing over the instrument controls.

"What I mean is, if we keep her straight out, we can hit hyper long before any patrol could possibly touch us."

Lin said nothing.

"Hey, we don't owe them anything! We're even! With this ship, we can make a fortune!"

"My breeding money," Lin said softly.

"Why should we get killed?" Dal continued. "Even in this baby, a twelve-ship patrol would be tough, right?"

"Even allowing for our superiority of firepower and speed, our chances would still be one-in-three of surviving a battle," Tulak chimed in.

"Tanya's ship will be leaving shortly," Lin said, looking from his instrument board to Dal.

Dal stared at the viewscreens. "Yeah."

"No way she can make it without us," Lin said.

Dal sighed. "Did I ever tell you you're a pain in the ass, Lin?"

The whelf grinned. "I seem to recall that you have."

"Ah, hell!" Dal's grin was bigger

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than Lin's. "We got surprise–let's go find Hookthorn's lousy patrol!"

"Why not?" Lin said. "Mating season isn't for another two years!"

"Tulak?"

"Course locked in. We'll arrive in the vicinity of the patrol in six point four minutes."

What the hell, Dal thought. What the hell!

XI

Six minutes wasn't very long, but Dal had been flying space craft since he was thirteen–illegally, of course, but for nearly ten years. He let his hands begin to get the feel of the ship, and he was pleased. The response was instant–instant and exact; it was a magnificent machine!

"What's the name of our new bird, anyway?" he asked.

Lin stroked the comp controls for the ship's log. A second later, he laughed.

"What?"

"The name! Hookthorn called it *Revenge!*

Dal's laugh blended with Lin's. Now *that* was fitting! Only it wasn't Hookthorn who was going to be on the giving end!

"Now approaching enemy vessels," Tulak sang.

"Got 'em on the view screens!" Lin said. "I bet they're wondering what Lord Hookthorn himself is doing out here. Surprise inspection, maybe? Or maybe they heard about the attack on the base and figure Hookthorn is running!"

"Yeah, or maybe they think we're the ghost of Christmas past!" Dal said. "Let's give 'em something else to worry about!"

The transceiver blared. Someone was requesting an ID code.

"This is Lord Kreeg Hookthorn!" Dal roared. "What the hell do you mean you want an ID code? Don't you recognize my ship?"

The *Revenge* sped closer toward the patrol.

"Er–that is, your orders, Lord, you said nobody–"

"Fool! Do you think I meant me?" Dal grinned at Lin.

There was a pause, and Dal cut his 'caster off. "How many of 'em can we get on one pass, Lin?"

"Computer says maximum of three."

The transceiver crackled again. "I'm sorry, Lord, but I must insist–"

"What *was* your rank, *private* whoever-you-are?" Dal tried to sound menacing.

"Lord! I'm only following *your* orders!"

"Close enough!" Lin growled.

"Good! Let 'em have it!"

"What was that, Lord?" asked the voice over the speaker.

"Never mind!" Dal said. "I promote you again. And good-bye!"

Lin's hands did their magic dance, and the *Revenge* shook with the force of its firing weaponry.

On the screen, two of the ships flared into brilliant whiteness, into a slashing, silent explosion of light! The viewer polarizers cut in, dimming the scene.

Then, a third ship, raked by laser fire, ruptured into three uneven fragments, a cloud of frozen oxy turning into a shroud of ice crystals around its corpse.

"Evasive running! Juice it, Tulak!"

"Affirmative."

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"Here they come!" Lin said. "I'm seeding proximity mines!"

Behind the speeding black ship, small orbs of dark plastic spewed out–the proximity mines–along with streamers of radar-jamming aluminum and tiny clumps of broad-signal beepers!

"Mines away!"

"All right!" Dal put the *Revenge* into a tight, down–right curve.

On the rear–view scanners, a patrol ship blossomed into incandescence as it plowed into one of the deadly mines! Several other of the killing devices went off, triggered by fragments of the exploding ship. The remaining ships broke off in a sharp up–turn.

Four down, eight to go!

The *Revenge* shook suddenly–Dal felt the jolt from the bottom of his spine to the top of his skull.

"Tulak?"

"We have sustained a laser blast on our stern screen, to the port side."

"Damage?"

"Negative," Tulak sang.

"Man, this ship is built!" Lin said.

"Tulak, give us a hard circle and take her–I want to get behind them!"

"Affirmative."

Dal felt the pressure begin to push him back into his seat. Harder, harder–until he couldn't move.

He knew that Tulak was unaffected by the heavy G–force. His massive arms would be moving with precision, those thick fingers flitting with improbable softness and skill over the controls.

The *Revenge* circled, half again as fast as the pursuing ships.

"They've sent out a call for back-up!" Lin groaned. "But the base doesn't seem to be sending any."

Ha!

The pressure eased, and Dal saw three ships in front of him on the viewers. "Stay with the one on the right!"

"That's a copy!" Lin said. He set the MJ computer into action. The deadly reefer–circuit locked onto its victim. The ceepee spitters roared, joined by a thinner laser beam. The fleeing ship was suspended in time, too slow.

"Gotcha!" Lin said.

The *Revenge* shot through the boiled dust and scrambled atoms of what had been a Lazney Lancer.

"Seven left!" Dal said. "They're re–grouping."

"I'm going to fire a cobalt–torpedo!" Lin said.

"The range is too far for effective use," Tulak sang.

"Who cares? I've always wanted to use one–it'll scare 'em!"

Dal laughed. This was insane! And yet, he felt it was better to risk death–here, in space–than to live like a king on the ground!

The computer plotted a course for the torpedo, and launched the killer missile. It roared forth from the sleek ship, burned through space, and–

Did no damage, just as Tulak had said. But it made a nice flash.

And it scattered the ships. That was good and bad. Good, because they were scared–they knew the *Revenge* could out–gun any one of them. Bad, because it just might have scared them enough to come at the *Revenge* from all directions.

It was bad, and they did!

"Uh-oh!" Lin said.

Then, the special band on the transceiver burbled into life. It was Emba!

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"She's away! Good work! Now I suggest you move out–assuming you're still alive to hear this."

"You heard the man! Tulak, get us out of here!"

The *Revenge* accelerated, faster and faster. Dal felt himself grow heavier and heavier; he watched Lin seem to flatten out next to him, his fur spreading over the ackcel couch.

He blacked out, but he wasn't worried this time. The ship was whole the Tulak had it!

They'd done it!

★

Dal awoke to the sound of Tulak's repetitive sing-song: "Approaching destination. Are you conscious? Approaching destination. Are you–?"

"Yeah, yeah! I'm awake!"

Lin moaned. "Sister to a turd! Are we still alive?"

"Yeah. Good old Tulak got us away!"

"We are approaching the fifth planet," Tulak intoned.

"I still don't know about this part, Dal," Lin said, combing at his thick facial fur with his short claws. "Taking on a beancan patrol with a supership like this is one thing. But this . . .?"

"Well, so far Emba's been on the beam. Maybe he's right about this, too."

"Maybe? Snail cancer! *Maybe* could get us dead!"

Dal shrugged. "We could still pull out."

After a few seconds, Lin shook his head. "I guess not. The party isn't over yet."

"Good! Tulak, have you spotted the base?"

"Affirmative. I have a fix on the

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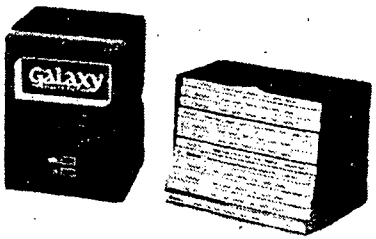

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autobeacon."

"Okay. Lead me in. We're going down!"

XII

Everywhere, the thick, red ore dust seemed to cover things. It was a desolate looking scene. Even with the masks, the air was barely breatheable. Dal imagined he could smell the taint of raw iron, could taste the metallic grit of the all-pervading dust. That was impossible, of course–the masks filtered down to viruses–but the sensation was strong.

The air was too cold to take without a climate suit, even for Lincheni. And the Demi–Whelf bitched about that. The smallest suit on the *Revenge* still hung in large folds over the whelf's stubby frame.

Lin kicked at a dusty rock. Red powder rose in a fine mist around his boot.

"A month, eh?"

"That's what the man said."

They looked around. The huge mining camp was devoid of life except for them. Hookthorn had shut it down for good reasons. He knew miners were an independent lot, and if left alone there, they might cause trouble.

Over three hundred bubble ships–the ore carriers–were still grounded at the camp, plus fifty or sixty smaller orbital hoppers. None of the craft were equipped to go Hyper, so none could get away to warn the Confederation. But under the right circumstances, the bubble ships could be rigged into flying atomic bombs. Hookthorn didn't want to lose any of his small fleet to some wild–eyed miner trying to fly a suicide mission against him, so he'd pulled everyone off the planet.

The ships were, however, still operational. Hookthorn didn't know when he might require more iron, so he'd left them intact, should the need arise.

According to Lao Emba, it was going to be a fatal mistake!

"We might as well get started," Dal said.

"Yeah," the floppy looking Lincheni said. "Even with Tulak's help, it'll take me two weeks just to program the computer to handle it."

"And even then, it's going to be close using Emba's schedule. It's gonna be a long month!"

"A banker," Lin said.

"What?"

"I could have been a banker. True, it didn't pay much, but I had an uncle who was fairly high up in banking circles back on New London. In ten or fifteen years, I could have saved enough to breed. Maybe not the best-looking female, but something, at least!"

"Uh, Lin . . ."

"Crap, never mind! If we pull this–this–*thing* off, we'll at least have the *Revenge*. We ought to be able to make enough with her in a couple of months for fifty females!"

"Cheer up, Lin. None of us have been doing too well in breeding circles these days."

"Well, at least we can, given the opportunity," Lin said.

"You have a point, friend, you have a point!"

★

It was hellish work. Dal hated it. The stink of circuit flux was every-

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where, and the thin, blue smoke clouded Dal's eyes. Working on the tiny circuits under the magnifying vapor wasn't helping his vision, either.

He held the spot–laser's button down. Bzzt. Another good circuit.

Crap. How many more ships left to do? A hundred? And how long had it been? Three weeks? It seemed like three years! They'd never get them done in time. Even after Lin and Tulak had managed to get the computer on the *Revenge* programmed, they had been unable to work fast enough. Although Tulak could work around the clock, Dal and Lin had to sleep.

He was so tired! This was exacting work. Dal made a mental note of another profession he'd never enter–electronic repair. Why'd they have to make the things so goddamned small, anyway?

There! Another unit finished. He tongued the comswitch on his climate suit–the ships were cold, there wasn't enough fuel to waste heating them–and called Lin.

"How's it going?"

"–bastard son of a feline! Spawn of a–!"

"Hey, Lin."

"What?"

"I said, 'How's it going?' "

"Like digging through a mountain of offal with a teaspoon, that's how it's going!"

"Yeah, well, keep up the good work!" Dal laughed. It didn't look as if Lin was planning on going into electronics, either!

★

With three days remaining before the expected deadline, Lao Emba called with a scramble coded message. Lin tied the code into the ship's computer.

"Tomorrow," Emba said.

"But we've still got fifty-five ships to finish!" Dal said.

"Sorry. You'll have to make do–it's not my idea. A Confederation scout broke Hyper yesterday just long enough to send *me* a coded message. Tomorrow, at 0500, they're going to break out in the–have you got your system charts?"

Lin nodded as he put the chart on the comp screen.

"Yeah."

"They'll hit the area called Queechan C'enk. We–you–have got to have Hookthorn's ships there by then."

You're crazy, Dal thought.

"You're crazy!" Lin said.

"Listen, if you did the circuitry as I outlined, it'll work!"

"How are things on–planet?" Dal asked.

"Bad. After the Culebrath attacked the camp, Hookthorn became even more paranoid–although in this case, it isn't really paranoia. He clamped down hard on the populace. There have been purges, executions. While most of the Culebrath managed to escape after the raid, Hookthorn has been bombing the weed fields."

"What about the theft of his ship?"

"He guessed rightly on that–figured you took it. But fortunately he also thinks you were destroyed trying to escape."

"But—how?"

"His patrol was afraid to tell him otherwise."

Lin laughed.

"It's lucky," Emba continued. "While information pertaining as to who you are–ah, *were*, was allowed to fall into his hands, so he wasn't worried about you running to the

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Confederation, it's better this way–he feels safe."

This whole thing gets wilder all the time, Dal thought.

"Gentlebeings, I suggest you prepare your armada for lift–off!"

Dal looked at Lin, then at Tulak. Well. He supposed it wasn't any crazier than anything else which had happened!

Within two hours, the bubble ships began to take off.

Within four hours, all two hundred and fifty of the prepared vessels were in space.

"Okay, Lin," Dal said, feeling more than just a little nervous. "Let's try it!"

"You got it, chief!" The Demi–Whelf mumbled a quick prayer–curse, adjusted a control, and stroked in the program.

Five bubble ships zipped by the *Revenge* in a tight formation. Dal watched them become smaller and smaller, until the tiny dots winked out and became invisible.

"Tulak, what do you show on long–scan radar?"

"Five vessels."

"Okay, Lin, plug 'em in!"

Lin nodded, and touched another control.

"Tulak?"

"There are now fifty blips indicating vessels on the screen, moving in formation."

"Ha, ha!" Dal whooped. "We did it!"

It worked! If all the circuits held, each of the nearly hollow bubble ships would throw ten "ghosts" which would be picked up by radar as ships. As long as they were out of visual range of Hookthorn's ships, the two hundred–odd ore carriers would look like a fleet of twenty–five hundred ships!

As long as they *stayed* out of visual range . . . .

★

"I still don't–" began Lin.

"Look, Emba knows what he's talking about. It's human psychology. Hookthorn has over four thousand ships, right?"

"Yeah, but–"

"So when we show up with what looks like twenty–five hundred and start making noises for him to surrender, he won't be worried. He'll think we blew it–that we underestimated his strength, and don't know he's nearly two to one stronger than 'our 'fleet."

"So? I still–"

"Look, he *has* to flame up and destroy us, before we can get away and get help. And since the odds are so much in his favor, he'll figure to make short work of us."

"That part I understand. He won't have a hell of a lot of trouble doing it, once he finds out that instead of a couple thousand ships–of–the–line all we have is two hundred and fifty weaponless rock haulers."

"Right! Except that the Confeds are brave but not stupid. Once they–we–see we're outnumbered, everybody beats a strategic retreat, coincidentally into the Queechan C'enk region, where the real Confeds jump him!"

"Fools and morons," Lin muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. The Confeds jump him."

"Right. And they will outnumber

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him *three* to one. Any ships he leaves behind on–planet will pick up the drift pretty quickly and hault for Hyper!"

"And everybody lives happily ever after," Lin mumbled under his breath.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing, nothing! Just an old whelf proverb."

"It's a simple, direct plan."

"You know," Lin said, "if we stopped to think about this for a minute, we'd probably realize how impossible it all is."

"Yeah, I know," Dal admitted. "So don't stop to think about it."

XIII

"Units eighteen and nineteen, close up!" Dal said.

"Yes, sir!" came Lin's pre–recorded voice from one of the bubble ships.

"Units forty–one through forty–seven, initiate formation 'L.'"

"Affirmative, Commander." That was Tulak's sing-song–it wouldn't hurt to let them think they had a few Trogian robots on hand.

"You think they're getting this?" Lin asked.

"They ought to be–hell, we're bleeding all over two of their main bands."

"Gonna send the ultimatum now?"

"Not yet. After one of his patrols pick us up and reports."

"Then we run?"

"Don't worry about that! Just make sure you keep the 'fleet' out of line of sight of the planet–we don't want some astronomer accidentally noticing us!"

"There it is! Listen!"

"–approaching ships number over two thousand. Urgent, repeat, urgent! We have sensor contact with a fleet of over two thousand ships. Alert status! Alert!"

"That ought to do it," Lin said.

"Okay." Dal took a deep breath. "Here goes!

"Attention Planet Cynthia Dianne! This is Fleet Commander Rockwall of the Confederation of Man!"

"Rockwall?" Lin whispered.

Dal clicked off his comset and shrugged. "Might as well sound tough." He clicked the com back on.

"Attention Lord Kreeg Hookthorn! We know you have established a base on this planet. You are ordered to surrender or be destroyed!"

Give up, you crazy bastard, or me and my two hundred and fifty ping-pong balls will blow you away. Sure.

"Okay, Lin, they should have had time to count us on their fingers by now. What's happening?"

"Enemy ships lifting," Tulak cut in. "The count is eight hundred units, nine hundred, thirteen–"

"Uh, Dal . . .?"

"I heard! Let's get the hell out of here!"

The *Revenge* circled, and Lincheni began sending signals to the bubble ships to retreat.

Behind them, Hookthorn's forces flared away from the planet in attack formation.

"I sure hope the Confed's chronos aren't slow–" Lin began.

"Don't even think it!"

★

Just ahead lay the deep–space region of the C'enk.

Behind, according to Tulak, thirty–eight hundred ships were following.

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Almost there, almost!

"Enemy ships coming within visual range," Tulak said.

"Damn! Where the hell are the lousy–?"

"There went ten of our primaries!" Lin said.

Blap! A hundred ships at one whack! Hookthorn's men must be patting themselves on the back, telling each other what great marksmen they were.

"Come on, come on!"

"Eight more, no, make that twelve more ships gone!"

A hundred and twenty more of the 'fleet' down the tube.

Thud! The *Revenge* rattled and slued as the silent form of a Confederation Tong fighter zapped from Hyper less than fifty kilometers away.

Then another Confed ship materialized! Another! A dozen, a hundred!

"Yahoo! The sons o' bitches made it!" Lin screamed.

"Tulak, how many bubble ships do we have left?"

"Ninety four. Ninety one."

"Lin, blow those suckers!"

Lin tapped a control tab. Ninety-one empty ore carriers suddenly became ninety-one atomic explosions.

"How many did we get?"

"Sixty nine!" Lin said.

Well! Not bad for ping–pong balls!

"This place is getting very crowded!" Dal said. "Let's move!"

Around them, Confederation ships continued to wink into normal space.

The battle was joined!

All around them, the black curtain of space was being almost constantly lit by exploding ships and energy beams. Even with the viewers on full polarization, the glare was nearly blinding.

Dal aimed the *Revenge* toward the fleet of Hookthorn's lancers. Two of the ships came into range.

"Get 'em, Lin!"

Lincheni's hands made love to the computer's controls. Ceepee beams shot out, lasers hummed forth, cobalt torpedoes streaked away!

The lancers returned the fire. The *Revenge* shuddered, but her screens held.

And the lancers flared and vanished into nothingness.

"Go, Lin!"

"Four enemy ships approaching from the rear," Tulak sang.

"On the viewer!"

"Hang on!" Dal's fingers stroked the cool plastic controls; he felt the blood rush from his head as the ship accelerated and curved upward.

"They've split into two groups!"

"Going after the closest ones!" Dal yelled.

The ceepee cannons blasted at the two ships, and–missed!

"Lin? What the hell?"

A burned smell filled the cabin.

"I've got a blow–out on the primary firing and tracker circuit!"

"Switch the mother to secondary before those bastards–!"

Clang! The *Revenge* bounced. Dal's comspeaker jammed hard into his lips and teeth.

"Damage to the rear shield," Tulak sang unemotionally. "Primary circuit out, secondary back–up down–going to tertiary."

"Lin!"

"Secondary fire controls locked on!"

Dal guided the ship around in a tighter circle, heading toward the starboard side of two of the lancers.

"Shoot, you hairy fairy, shoot!"

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Ceepee flared, found the two ships.

"Got 'em!"

"What about the other two?"

"They've got problems of their own. Four Tong fighters are on their tails!"

"Great!" Dal grinned.

"Uh-oh!"

"Now what?"

"We've got two Tongs on us, too!"

"What? The idiots!" Dal flicked on his comset. "Hey, assholes! Can't you see we're on *your* side?"

The seat restraints cut into his shoulders and thighs as the screens opaqued black from a direct ceepee hit.

"The stupid fuckers are shooting at us!"

"We're in Blackthorn's ship!" Lin rasped, fumbling with his controls.

"Crap!"

Now what were they going to do? They had had a lot of hassles with the Confederation already–if they shot down a few Tong fighters!

On the other hand, they couldn't let the stupid Tongs shoot them down, either!

The *Revenge* jumped again as another blast knocked her sideways and forward!

"Tertiary circuit on rear shield is down," Tulak said. "The shield is now inoperative."

"Tulak! Get us out of here!"

The *Revenge* leaped forward, leaving the slower Tongs behind.

"Now what?" Lin asked. "Everybody is shooting at us!"

"Time to go! They don't need us. We'll just warp into Hyper and get the hell out of–"

"Negative," Tulak said. "The last attack disabled the shifter. We cannot go into Hyperspace."

Oh, fine! "Okay, so we run in normal space. We've still got more speed than any of those canaries. We'll go darkside and find a hole to crawl into. Tulak!"

The pressure increased, spreading Dal's cheeks and lips.

"Tulak . . . she's . . . yours!"

"Affirmative."

This was really getting to be old, Dal thought, just before he blacked out again . . . .

★

The screaming was so shrill he thought it would burst his eardrums! He recognized the tone–Tulak's "A" above high "C."

"Shut the hell up!" The tone ceased, but Dal's ears still rang.

The forward–port viewers showed nightside of the planet Cynthia Dianne, and everything looked quiet.

Wait!

"Hey, Lin! Wake up! Lin!"

"Wh–what?" the whelf grumbled irritably.

"Company! Coming up fast!"

Lincheni looked at the scanner, then his computer screen. "What kind of ship can do that kind of speed?"

"The craft is a Styne–Alison fighter," Tulak said.

Whoops. Dal's mind tried to focus on that fact over the ringing in his ears. I wonder who's in–?

"Hookthorn!" Dal and Lin said together. It had to be! They should have known he'd have another ship stashed somewhere. He was too smart to get caught unprepared for his personal survival, regardless of what happened to his navy.

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Dal's mind scrabbled over itself, trying to think rationally.

"Lin, the weaponry?"

"We've got ceepee and some laser–no mines, no torpedoes."

"Tulak, the engines?"

"Normal space drive functioning. Hyper shifters are out."

"And the screens?"

"Rear screens are out. Both lateral screens are on secondary. Front screens still on primary."

Bad news! They were partially crippled. Hookthorn's ship would be fully armed and intact. And he'd have a lot more space–time than Dal did in this kind of ship.

They ought to run–it would be the smartest thing. They'd done their part!

And yet . . . .

If Hookthorn got away, he'd start over again, on some other world, trying to build a new force, trying his maniacal attempts at galactic rule. There'd be another war someday.

They had to *do* something!

They had to stop him.

Maybe they could bluff! Dal switched on his comset. "Hookthorn! Give it up! Your fleet's being destroyed. You haven't got a chance!"

"You! I should have killed you before!"

"It's too late, Hookthorn! You've lost!"

"Like hell! They might have gotten my fleet, but I'll get you before I go!" His transmission clicked off, and the approaching ship flipped into an attack arc toward the *Revenge*.

Well. So much for bluffing!

Dal's hands sweated as he spun his own ship into a spiral toward the oncoming vessel. He couldn't let Hookthorn get behind him, not with the

shields down in back. He'd have to meet him head-on! But things looked bad.

"Dal, he's got us outgunned!"

"You heard Tulak–the CMA shields are down! If we run, we'll damn sure get killed!"

Lin said nothing.

"But we do have one advantage. Tulak can take higher G's. We can out-fly him!"

"But Tulak can't shoot! What happens if we pass out?"

"We'll worry about–"

Clang! Metal screeched inside the *Revenge* as the two ships tore past each other, hurling eerie green–and–red lances of ceepee and laser across the blackness of the screened hulls.

"Starboard screen now on tertiary," Tulak said.

"Get us around before he comes

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back!" Dal shouted. "If he gets to us on the right or rear, we're dead!"

Dal fought unconsciousness as the *Revenge* jerked, too fast for a human pilot. Don't let go now!

There! Hookthorn, moving slower, was still turning.

"Go . . . Tulak . . . hard!"

The *Revenge* streaked for the other ship, ceepee cannons spraying their deadly particles. A hit!

"His . . . screens . . . are–are–holding!" Lin said with a gasp.

Then Hookthorn's ship was heading for them again, nose–to–nose.

Dal fought to move his leaden fingers. They had to slide to starboard, had to take the next shots on the port side.

Like ancient warriors on some more ancient steeds, the two ships passed each other again, thrusting with terrible energies!

"Port shields holding on secondary."

Something, at least!

"Bring us around again! Goose it!"

The blackness crawled around the edges of his mind. Dal fought it–fought it–

And lost.

He awoke with Lin slapping his face with the back of a hairy paw. "Sleep later, Dal! We're on his tail!"

Dal dragged himself from the brink of darkness in his head and stared. There! They were behind Hookthorn!

"Give it everything we've got, Lin!"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing?" Two furry crabs scuttled across the gunnery circuit switches, telling the computer to shoot, shoot, shoot!

Pop! A blue spark flashed from the comp control board!

"Piss! The secondary's gone!"

The *Revenge's* ceepee cannons winked out, the lasers died!

Ahead, Hookthorn's ship curved away.

"Damn!"

Another flash from Lin's board! There was that burned-flux smell Dal knew too well! He twisted to look at Lin.

"That's it! The tertiary blew! We've lost computer gunnery!"

"How about manual?"

"Manual? I can't out–shoot a computer with manual!"

"You'd better try!"

"Dal, I–"

"Pretend you're a computer! But if you don't do something, we are going to get–Hey! Where'd he go?"

Boom! A roar vibrated through the ship. The control cabin suddenly seemed filled with fragments of torn metal. Thin sections of shattered aluminum extrusion whizzed through the room like arrows!

Dal felt a sudden burn in his right shoulder–a five-centimeter-long section of jagged metal, half a centimeter thick, stuck from his deltoid!

"Lin? Are you all right?"

The Demi–Whelf pulled at one of his thin ears–a notch had been cut from it by a fragment of sharp metal–otherwise, he seemed okay.

"Tulak!" There was no answer.

Dal pulled at his comset–and found another bit of shattered metal shard piercing the tiny circuit box–his headset was dead.

"Lin!"

"Tulak's okay–but he says we took a direct hit on our number-three engine–it's out!"

Lin reached over and tugged at the

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aluminum strip which protruded from Dal's shoulder. It came out with a small sucking noise, and a little blood seeped with it–not much.

"Don't worry about that! Hookthorn's behind us!"

"Yeah. Good-bye, Dal, it was nice–"

"Stuff it! We're not dead yet!"

But Dal knew it was going to be a matter of only a few seconds if he didn't do something. Only what? With two engines, there was no way they could out–run him. The rear shield was down, they had no mines–there wasn't anything they could–

"Wait! Dal jerked Lin's comset from the whelf's head.

"Hey, what–?"

"Tulak! Tulak, *kill the engines!* Do it now!"

"Dal!" Lin yelled. "Are you crazy?"

"Do it Tulak! Quick!"

Dal felt himself push against the restraints as the big Trogian robot cut the power to the two remaining engines.

And Hookthorn's ship burned past, just missing the vastly slowed *Revenge!*

A stall–the oldest trick in the book–and it had worked!

"Okay, Tulak! Give it everything she's got left! Lin, start shooting!"

"We'll never catch him with only two engines!"

"You want to wait for him to come back? Go!"

Lin started the ceepees blasting manually. The thin green beams began to track the shrinking ship, slowly, slowly.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

"We've got you now, you bastard!"

"Tong fighters approaching," Tulak sang.

"Oh, shit!"

Lin glanced up. "What?"

"Never mind! Shoot!"

But it was too late. As they watched, Hookthorn's ship veered away for deep space and accelerated. Abruptly, the golden flare of its engines vanished, as it winked into Hyper.

"Gone! The lousy son of a bitch got away!"

"Fighters closing rapidly," Tulak said.

Lin looked at his screen. "Hey, we've got company!"

"Yeah. Tulak told me."

"Now what are we going to do?"

Dal sighed. "We'd better run up the white flag. Send out a surrender."

Lin twisted a control. "Uh . . . ."

" 'Uh?' What 'Uh?' "

"The extra–ship transmitter is out!"

Dal clenched his fists! "Dammit! Why do these things happen?"

"Enemy fighters coming within–"

"I heard, I heard! Can we outrun 'em?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly? What the hell does that mean?" Dal shook his head. Somehow, this seemed very familiar.

"With two engines remaining, we are still slightly faster; however . . ."

"What? What?"

"The attacking craft will soon come within firing range if we attempt to outrun them in deep space."

Well, damn! That left–oh, no!

"Take us down to the planet!" Dal said.

"Oh, no!" Lin said.

"Better idea?"

Lin shook his head.

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The Tongs began to close in, and Dal felt the now-familiar pressure of too much gravity mashing him. His mouth pulled open into a toothy grimace, and his arms became lead weights, a hundred kilos each, it felt like.

Circuits in Lincheni's computer board flared and burned, and vile stink poured from the board in waves of gray–black–white smoke.

Emergency sirens screamed, but their sound began to fade.

Crashing into this damned planet was getting to be a habit, Dal thought, just like blacking out.

XIV

The first thing Dal heard when he came to was Lin, practicing a curse at the top of his obviously unharmed lungs.

"Rotten dog eating fraad sniffers! Sons of pith–carriers! Turtle–balling–!"

"Hey, knock all that noise off! My head hurts enough already!"

"You all right?" Lin asked.

Aside from the cut on his shoulder and contusions and a few pulled muscles, Dal couldn't find any major damage. "Yeah. I'm okay."

"Good!" Lin resumed cursing.

★

Dal looked around. They were outside of the ruined ship. To his left, Tulak surveyed the jungle calmly, the dim blue light filtering from his near-featureless face almost invisible in the tropical sunshine.

The *Revenge* looked to be in worse shape than the *Starbird* did after her crash landing–that was two ships he'd piled up to rot in the jungle!

Lin finally ran down, out of breath. He turned to Dal. "I hate to sound like a cliché, but isn't this where we came in?"

Dal nodded. "Almost. Only we're a little better off this time!"

"Oh? How do you figure that?"

"This time we're going to look up a certain old man and a pretty female senator. They owe us a ship!"

"What about the Confeds? They won't exactly welcome us with open arms. I can't remember exactly how many charges they want us on."

"Thirty-six," Tulak interrupted.

"Yeah, thanks, but what do you–?"

Dal managed a sore-lipped grin.

"So what's a few Confeds to someone who took on an entire navy with a few empty ore-carriers?"

Lin returned the grin. "Well. You–do have a point!"

"One other thing. After we get that ship, there's a certain Lord Hookthorn I think we ought to look up, too. I figure he owes us something!"

Lin swatted a bug trying to nest in his thick chest fur.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "I guess the female whelves on New London can wait one more season."

They both laughed, while Tulak gleamed silently in the setting tropical sun.

—Jesse Peel

PUNKWORLD

Next Issue

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HOLLYWOOD—This coming summer, many of the most important releases from the major distributors will be science fiction and/or fantasy. At the end of 1978, the following were among the films announced as 1979 summer releases.

NIGHTWING. This is an occult suspenser centering on American Indian superstitions, and as part of a medicine man's curse, hordes of vampire bats swarm out of caverns to attack people. From the novel.

THE RAVAGERS. Another post—holocaust movie, starring *Richard Harris.* This was produced by *Saul David,* who so generously gave us FANTASTIC VOYAGE and LOGAN'S RUN. It's apparent to me that these after—the—bomb pictures are merely going over ground covered so much better in SF novels long ago.

Steven Spielberg has been authorized to add a few scenes to CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND for its general rerelease in the summer. And his next film, **1941,** will also apparently be essentially a fantasy; more special effects than in CE3K are promised for this fantasy of the Japanese non-invasion of California.

PROPHECY. *John Frankenheimer's* hush—hush anti—pollution shocker. One source described it as an ecologically—minded CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON, with pollution—spawned mutants menacing mankind.

ALIEN will be out this summer. This will probably be the big SF release of 1979; at least, I don't know of any other as significant. The script is by *Ron Shusett* and *Dan O'Bannon,* and deals with a man—eating monster loose aboard a spaceship. The design of the film is largely the result of artists trained in comic-strip work, including *Moebius* and *Ron Cobb.*

(Continued on page 62)

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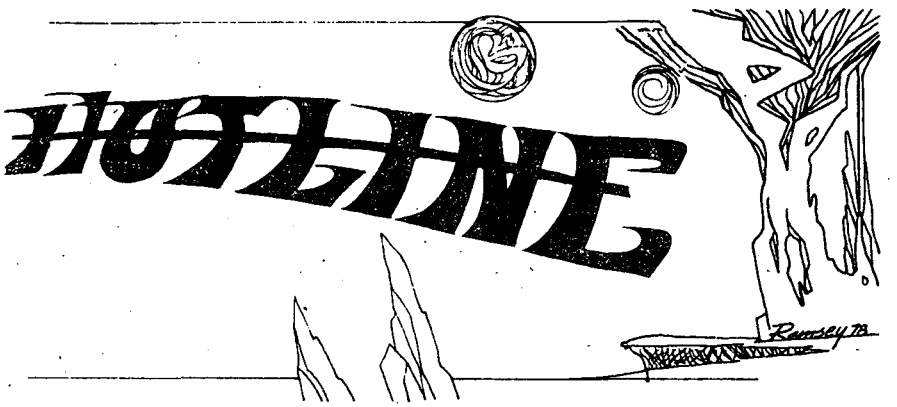

NEW YORK—As a special feature each issue of SF HOTLINE will present an in-depth look at one author's forthcoming work.

The first author to be so featured is *Jack Williamson.* The dean of SF authors, Mr. Williamson has been writing SF since 1929. In his half-a-century of production he has pioneered such innovative concepts as countraterrane matter, and given the SF field such remarkable books as THE HUMANOIDS, THE LEGION OF SPACE, DARKER THAN YOU THINK, SEETEE SHOCK and his most recent book, THE POWER OF BLACKNESS. So it is with great pleasure that I report the following:

A new book, BROTHER TO DEMONS, BROTHER TO GODS, out this spring from Bobbs-Merrill.

A sequel to THE HUMANOIDS, entitled TEN TRILLION WISE MACHINES, due from Bantam.

A new Legion Of Space novel, QUEEN OF THE LEGION, coming from Pocket Books.

A sequel, written in collaboration with *Frederik Pohl,* to THE FARTHEST STAR (which appeared in GALAXY in 1974 under the title ORGS' EGG), which has been planned and the rights sold to Del Rey Books. The tentative title is WALL AROUND A STAR.

RUMORS to the contrary, Playboy Publications is not currently planning a competition magazine to Penthouse's Omni. Playboy New Publications Editor *Mort Perski* called such rumors totally incorrect and without any basis in fact.

Marion Zimmer Bradley has a new novel out from Doubleday titled THE HOUSE BETWEEN THE WORLDS.

Larry Niven and *Jerry Pournelle* have done a "rationale" for a Buck

(Continued on page 88)

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(Continued from page 60)

THE HUMANOID stars *Richard Kiel* ("Jaws" of THE SPY WHO LOVED ME) as a superhuman hero of a future world. This Italian—U.S. coproduction was partly filmed in Israel.

METEOR is the long—in—production epic of a science-fiction disaster. A huge meteor swarm is heading for the Earth, and it's up to free—world scientist *Sean Connery* and Soviet *Natalie Wood* to stop it. I predict the film will not be any great shakes, despite its great cost, good cast (which also includes *Brian Keith* and *Henry Fonda*) and lavish effects. This is because there are too many compromises at work on the script and the film; American International, which is producing the film, always seems to want to make their biggest films appeal to everyone at once, and they generally end up appealing to no one.

C.H.O.M.P.S. is apparently about a robot dog. Since the top dogs at AIP don't usually exert as much control over their lower—budget films as they do over the more expensive ones, the cheaper films are less compromised and often more watchable; it might turn out that C.H.O.M.P.S. is better than METEOR.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME has been announced as a remake of *H.G. Wells'* THINGS TO COME, but it's probably going to more strongly resemble another STAR WARS imitation; a cute robot has been added to the cast, which includes *Jack Palance.* It's produced by *Harry Alan Towers,* who has almost never done anything in his entire career that's worth watching.

The new version of DRACULA, starring *Frank Langella, Laurence Olivier* and *Donald Pleasence,* will also be out in the summer. It's elaborate and expensive, but since it's based on the creaky old Balderston—Deane play, I fear for the quality of the script.

SPACEPORT is to be produced by *Max Keller* from a script by *Glen Benest* and *Matthew Barr.* TERROR ON MAD DOG ISLAND, which is announced as science fiction, is set for a $3.5 million budget (but I doubt it), produced by *Brad Marks* and written by *Sidney Leveille.*

Of course, the Hugo for 1979 will probably go to *Kubrick's* THE SHINING. He's made three fantastic films before, and won the Hugo each time. There's no reason to doubt he'll do it again.

—Bill Warren

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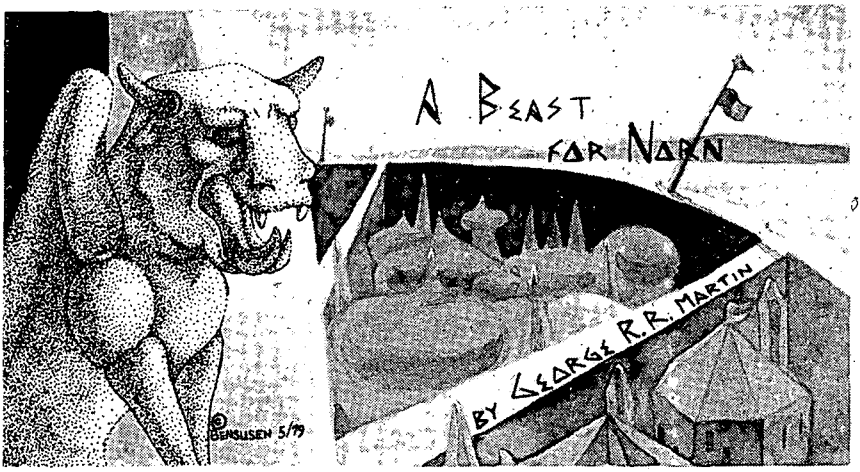

I.

Haviland Tuf was relaxing in an alehouse on Tamber when the thin man found him. He sat by himself in the darkest corner of the dimly lit tavern, his elbows resting on the table, his bald head almost brushing the low wooden beam above. Four empty mugs sat before him, insides streaked by rings of foam, while a fifth, half-full, was cradled in huge, calloused hands.

If Tuf was aware of the curious glances the other patrons gave him from time to time, he showed no sign; he quaffed his ale methodically, and his face–bone-white and completely hairless, as was the rest of him–was without expression. He was a man of heroic dimensions, a giant with an equally gigantic paunch, and made a singular figure drinking alone in his booth.

Although he was not *quite* alone; his black tomcat Dax lay asleep on the table, a ball of dark fur, and Tuf would occasionally set down his mug of ale and idly stroke his quiet companion. Dax would not stir from his comfortable position among the empty mugs. The cat was fully as large, compared to other cats, as Haviland Tuf, compared to other men.

When the thin man came up to Tuf's booth, Tuf said nothing at all. He merely looked up, and blinked, and waited for the other to begin.

"You are Haviland Tuf, the animal-seller," the man said. He was painfully thin. His garments, all black leather and grey fur, hung loose on him, bagging here and there. Yet he was plainly a man of some means, since he wore a thin brass coronet around his brow, under a mop of black hair, and his fingers were all adorned with rings.

Tuf stroked Dax, and–looking down at the cat–began to speak. "Did you hear that, Dax?" he said. He spoke

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very slowly, his voice a deep bass with only a hint of inflection. "I am Haviland Tuf, the animal-seller. Or so I am taken to be." Then he looked up at the thin man who stood impatiently. "Sir," he said. "I am indeed Haviland Tuf. And I do indeed trade in animals. Yet perhaps I do not consider myself an animal-seller. Perhaps I consider myself an ecological engineer."

The thin man waved his hand in an irritated gesture, and slid uninvited into the booth opposite Tuf. "I understand that you own a seedship of the ancient Ecological Corps, but that does not make you an ecological engineer, Tuf. They are all dead, and have been for centuries. But if you prefer to be called an ecological engineer, then well and good. I require your services. I want to buy a monster from you, a great fierce beast."

"Ah," said Tuf, to the cat again. "He wants to buy a monster, this stranger who seats himself at my table."

"My name is Herold Norn, if that is what's bothering you," the thin man said. "I am the Senior Beast-Master of my House, one of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica."

"Lyronica," Tuf stated. "I have heard of Lyronica. The next world out from here towards the Fringe, is it not? Esteemed for its gaming pits?"

Norn smiled. "Yes, yes," he said.

Haviland Tuf scratched Dax behind the ear, a peculiar rhythmic scratch, and the tomcat slowly uncurled, yawning, and glanced up at the thin man. A wave of reassurance came flooding into Tuf; the visitor was well-intentioned and truthful, it seemed. According to Dax. All cats have a touch of psi. Dax had more than a touch; the genetic wizards of the vanished Ecological Corps had seen to that. He was Tuf's mind-reader.

"The affair becomes clearer," Tuf said. "Perhaps you would care to elaborate, Herold Norn?"

Norn nodded. "Certainly, certainly. What do you know of Lyronica? Particularly of the gaming pits?"

Tuf's heavy, stark-white face remained emotionless. "Small things. Perhaps not enough, if I am to deal with you. Tell me what you will, and Dax and I will consider the matter."

Herold Norn rubbed thin hands together, and nodded again. "Dax?" he said. "Oh, your cat. A handsome animal, although personally I have never been fond of beasts who cannot fight. Real beauty lies in killing-strength, I always say."

"A peculiar attitude," Tuf commented.

"No, no," said Norn, "not at all. I hope your work here has not infected you with Tamberkin squeamishness."

Tuf drained his mug in silence, signaled for two more. The barkeep brought them promptly.

"Thank you, thank you," Norn said when the mug was set, golden and foaming, in front of him.

"Proceed."

"Yes. Well, the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica compete in the gaming pits, you know. It began—oh, centuries ago. Before that, the Houses warred. This way is much better. Family honor is upheld, fortunes are made, and no one is injured. You see, each House controls great tracts, scattered widely over the planet, and

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since the land is very thinly settled, animal life teems. The lords of the Great Houses, many years ago during a time of peace, started to have animal-fights. It was a pleasant diversion, rooted deep in history–you are aware, maybe, of the ancient custom of cock-fighting and the Old Earth folk called Romans who would set all manner of strange beasts against each other in their great arena?"

Norn paused and drank ale, waiting for an answer, but Tuf stroked a quietly alert Dax and said nothing.

"No matter," the thin Lyronican finally said, wiping foam from mouth with the back of his hand. "That was the beginning of the sport. Each House had its own particular land, its own particular animals. The House of Varcour, for example, sprawls in the hot, swampy south, and they are fond of sending huge lizard-lions to the gaming pits. Feridian, a mountainous realm, has bred and championed its fortunes with a species of rock-ape which we call, naturally, *feridians*. My own house, Norn, stands on the grassy plains of the large northern continent. We have sent a hundred different beasts into combat in the pits, but we are most famed for our ironfangs."

"Ironfangs," Tuf said.

Norn gave a sly smile. "Yes," he said proudly. "As Senior Beast-Master, I have trained thousands. They are lovely animals! Tall as you, with fur of a marvelous blue-black color, fierce and relentless."

"Canine?"

"But such canines," Norn said.

"Yet you require a monster."

Norn drank more of his ale. "In truth, in truth. Folks from a dozen near worlds voyage to Lyronica, to watch the beasts fight in the gaming pits and gamble on the outcome. Particularly they flock to the Bronze Arena that has stood for six hundred years in the City of All Houses. That's where the greatest fights are fought. The wealth of our Houses and our world has come to depend on this. Without it, rich Lyronica would be as poor as the farmers of Tamber."

"Yes," said Tuf.

"But you understand, this wealth, it goes to the Houses according to their honor, according to their victories. The House of Arneth has grown greatest and most powerful because of the many deadly beasts in their varied lands; the others rank according to their scores in the Bronze Arena. The income from each match—all the monies paid by those who watch and bet—goes to the victor."

Haviland Tuf scratched Dax behind the ear again. "The House of Norn ranks last and least among the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica," he said, and the twinge that Dax relayed told him he was correct.

"You know," Norn said.

"Sir. It was obvious. But is it ethical to buy an offworld monster, under the rules of your Bronze Arena?"

"There are precedents. Some seventy-odd standard years ago, a gambler came from Old Earth with a creature called a timber wolf. The House of Colin backed him, in a fit of madness. His poor beast was matched against a Norn ironfang, and proved far from equal to its task. There are other cases as well.

"In recent years, unfortunately, our ironfangs have not bred well. The wild species has all but died out on the plains, and the few who remain

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become swift and elusive, difficult for our housemen to capture. In the breeding kennels, the strain seems to have softened, despite my efforts and those of the Beast-Masters before me. Norn has won few victories of late, and I will not remain Senior for long unless something is done. We grow poor. When I heard that a seedship had come to Tamber, then I determined to seek you out. I will begin a new era of glory for Norn, with your help."

Haviland Tuf sat very still. "I comprehend. Yet I am not in the habit of selling monsters. *The Ark* is a seedship, designed by the Earth Imperials thousands of years ago, to decimate the Hrangans through ecowar. I can unleash a thousand diseases, and have cloning material for beasts from more worlds than you can count. You misunderstand the nature of ecowar, however. The deadliest enemies are not large predators, but tiny insects that lay waste to a world's crops, or hoppers that breed and breed and crowd out all other life."

Herold Norn looked crestfallen. "You have nothing?"

Tuf stroked Dax. "Little. A million types of insects, a hundred thousand kinds of small birds, as many fish. But monsters–only a few–a thousand perhaps. They were used from time to time, for psychological reasons as often as not."

"A thousand monsters!" Norn was excited again. "That is more than enough! Surely, among that thousand we can find a beast for Norn!"

"Perhaps," Tuf said. "Do you think so, Dax?" he said to his cat. "Do you? So!" He looked at Norn again. "This matter does interest me, Herold Norn. And my work here is done, as I have given the Tamberkin a bird that will check their rootworm plague, and the bird does well. So Dax and I will take the *Ark* to Lyronica, and your gaming pits, and will decide what is to be done with them."

Norn smiled. "Excellent," he said. "Then I will buy this round." And Dax told Haviland Tuf in silence that the thin man was flush with the feel of victory.

2.

The Bronze Arena stood in the center of the City of All Houses, at the point where sectors dominated by the Twelve Great Houses met like slices in a pie. Each section of the rambling stone city was walled off, each flew a flag with distinctive colors, each had its own ambience and style; but all met in the Bronze Arena.

The Arena was not bronze after all, but black stone and polished wood. It bulked up, taller than all but a few of the city's scattered towers and minarets, topped by a shining bronze dome that gleamed with the orange rays of sunset. Gargoyles peered from narrow windows, carved of stone and hammered from bronze and wrought iron. Great doors in the black stone walls were also fashioned of metal, and there were twelve, each facing a different sector of the City of All Houses. The colors and the etching on each gateway were distinctive to its House.

Lyronica's sun was a fist of red flame smearing the horizon when Herold Norn led Haviland Tuf to the games. The housemen had just fired gas torches, metal obelisks that stood

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like dark teeth in a ring about the Bronze Arena, and the hulking ancient building was surrounded by flickering pillars of blue and orange flame. In a crowd of gamblers and gamesters, Tuf followed Herold Norn from the half–deserted streets of the Nornic slums down a path of crushed rock, passing between twelve bronze ironfangs who snarled and spit in timeless poses on either side of the street, and then through the wide Norn Gate whose doors were intricate ebony and brass. The uniformed guards, clad in the same black leather and grey fur as Herold Norn, recognized the Beast–Master and admitted them; others stopped to pay with coins of gold and iron.

The Arena was the greatest gaming pit of all: the sandy combat–floor sunk deep below ground level, with stone walls four meters high surrounding it. Then the seats began, atop the walls, circling and circling in ascending tiers to the doors. Enough seating for thirty thousand, although those towards the back had a poor view, and other seats were blocked by iron pillars. Betting stalls were scattered throughout the building, windows in the outer walls.

Herold Norn took Tuf to the best seats in the Arena, in front of the Norn section, with only a stone parapet separating them from the four–meter drop to the combat sands. The seats were not rickety wood–and–iron, like those in the rear, but thrones of leather, huge enough to accommodate even Tuf's vast bulk without difficulty, and opulently comfortable. "Every seat is bound in the skin of a beast that has died nobly below," Herold Norn told Tuf. Beneath them, a work crew of men in one–piece blue coveralls was dragging the carcass of a gaunt feathered animal toward one of the entryways. "A fighting–bird of the House of Wrai Hill," Norn explained. "The Wrai Beast–Master sent it up against a Varcour lizard–lion. Not the most felicitous choice."

Haviland Tuf said nothing. He sat stiff and erect, dressed in a grey vinyl coat that fell to his ankles, with flaring shoulder–boards and a visored green–and–brown cap emblazoned with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers. His large, rough hands interlocked atop his bulging stomach while Herold Norn kept up a steady conversation.

Then the Arena announcer spoke, the thunder of his magnified voice booming all around them. "Fifth match. From the House of Norn, a male ironfang, two years, weight 2.6 quintals, trained by Junior Beast–Master Kers Norn. New to the Bronze Arena." Immediately below, metal grated harshly, and a nightmare creature came bounding into the pit. The ironfang was a shaggy giant, sunken red eyes, a double row of curving teeth dripping slaver; a wolf grown all out of proportion, crossed with a saber–toothed tiger, legs as thick as young trees, speed and killing grace only partially disguised by blue–black fur that hid muscle. The ironfang snarled; the arena echoed to the noise; scattered cheering began around them.

Herold Norn smiled. "Kers is a cousin, one of our most promising juniors. He tells me this beast will do us proud. I like its looks, don't you?"

"Being new to all this, I have no standard of comparison," Tuf said flatly.

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The announcer began again. "From the House of Arneth–in–the–Gilded–Wood, a strangling–ape, six years, weight 3.1 quintals, trained by Senior Beast–Master Danel Leigh Arneth. Three times a veteran of the Bronze Arena, three times surviving."

Across the combat pit, another entryway–wrought in gold and crimson–slid open, and a second beast lumbered out on two squat legs and looked around. The strangling–ape was short but immensely broad, with a triangular torso and a bullet–shaped head, eyes sunk deeply under a heavy ridge of bone. Its arms, double–jointed and muscular, dragged in the arena sand. The beast was hairless but for patches of dark red fur under its arms, its skin a dirty white. And it smelled. Across the arena, Haviland Tuf still caught the musky odor.

"It sweats," Norn explained. "Danel has driven it to killing frenzy before sending it forth. His beast has the edge in experience, and the strangling–ape is a savage creature as well. Unlike its cousin, the mountain feridian, it is a natural carnivore and needs little training. But Kers' ironfang is younger. The match should be of interest." He leaned forward while Tuf sat calm, still.

The ape turned, growling, and already the ironfang was streaking toward it, a blue–black blur that scattered sand as it ran. The strangling–ape waited, spreading huge gangling arms, and Tuf had a blurred impression of the great Norn killer leaving the ground in one tremendous bound. Then the two animals were locked together, rolling over and over in a tangle of ferocity, and the arena became a symphony of screams. "The throat," Norn was shouting. "Tear out its throat!"

Then, as suddenly as they had met, the two beasts parted. The ironfang spun away and began to move in slow circles, and Tuf saw that one foreleg was bent and broken, so that it limped on the three remaining. Yet still it circled. The strangling–ape gave it no opening, but turned constantly to face it. Long gashes drooled blood on the ape's wide chest, where the ironfang's sabers had slashed, but the beast of Arneth seemed little weakened. Herold Norn had begun to mutter softly.

Impatient, the watchers began a rhythmic chant, a low wordless noise that swelled as new voices heard and joined. Tuf saw at once that the sound affected the animals below. Now they began to snarl and hiss, battle cries in savage voices, and the strangling–ape moved from one leg to the other in a macabre dance, while slaver ran in rivers from the gaping jaws of the ironfang. The chant grew and grew–Herold Norn joined in, thin body swaying slightly as he moaned–and Tuf recognized the killing–chant for what it was. The beasts below went into a frenzy. Suddenly the ironfang was charging again, and the ape's long arms reached to meet it. The impact of the threw the strangler backward, but Tuf saw that the ironfang's teeth had closed on air while the ape had wrapped its hands around the other's throat. The ironfang thrashed wildly, as they rolled in the sand. Then came a sharp, horribly loud snap, and the wolf–creature was a rag of fur, head lolling grotesquely to one side.

The watchers ceased their moaning chant and began to applaud and whis-

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tle. Afterward, the gold and crimson door slid open again and the strangling–ape returned to where it had come. Four men in Norn black and grey came out to carry off the corpse.

Herold Norn was sullen. "Another loss. I will speak to Kers. His beast did not find the throat."

Haviland Tuf stood up. "I have seen your Bronze Arena."

"Going?" Norn asked, anxious. "Not so soon! There are five more matches. In the next, a giant feridian fights a water–scorpion from Aman Island!"

"I need see no more. It is feeding time for Dax, so I must return to the *Ark*."

Norn scrambled to his feet, and put an anxious hand to Tuf's shoulder to restrain him. "Will you sell us a monster, then?"

Tuf shook off the Beast–Master's grip. "Sir. I do not like to be touched. Restrain yourself." When Norn's hand had fallen, Tuf looked down into his eyes. "I must consult my records, my computers. The *Ark* is in orbit. Shuttle up the day after next. A problem exists, I shall address myself to its correction." Then, without further words, Haviland Tuf turned and walked from the Bronze Arena, back to the spaceport of the City of All Houses, where his shuttlecraft sat waiting.

3.

Herold Norn had obviously not been prepared for the *Ark*. After his shuttle had docked and Tuf had cycled him through, the Beast–Master made no effort to disguise his reaction. "I should have known," he kept repeating. "The size of this ship, the *size*. I should have known."

Haviland Tuf stood unmoved, cradling Dax in one arm and stroking the cat slowly. "Old Earth built larger ships than modern worlds," he said impassively. "The *Ark*, as a seedship, had to be large. It once had two hundred crewmen. Now it has one."

"You are the *only* crewman?" Norn said.

Dax suddenly warned Tuf to be alert. The Beast–Master had begun to think hostile thoughts. "Yes," Tuf said. "The only crewman. But there is Dax, of course. And defenses programmed in, lest control be wrested from me."

Norn's plans withered, according to Dax. "I see," he said. Then, eagerly, "Well, what have you come up with?"

"Come," Tuf said.

He led Norn out down a small corridor that led to one larger. They boarded a three–wheeled vehicle and drove through a long tunnel lined by glass vats of all sizes and shapes, filled with bubbling liquid. One bank of vats was divided into units small as a man's fingernail; at the other extreme, there was a single unit large enough to contain the interior of the Bronze Arena. It was empty, but in some of the medium–sized tanks, dark shapes hung in translucent bags, stirring fitfully. Tuf, with Dax curled in his lap, stared straight ahead as he drove, while Norn looked wonderingly from side to side.

They departed the tunnel at last, and entered a small room that was all computer console. Four large chairs sat in the four corners of the chamber, with control panels on their arms; a circular plate of blue metal was built

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into the floor amidst them. Haviland Tuf dropped Dax into one of the chairs before seating himself in a second. Norn looked around, then took a chair opposite Tuf.

"I must inform you of several things," Tuf began.

"Yes, yes," said Norn.

"Monsters are expensive," Tuf said. "I will require one hundred thousand standards."

"*What!* That's an outrage! We would need a hundred victories in the Bronze Arena to amass that sum. I told you, Norn is a poor House."

"So. Perhaps then a richer House would meet the required price. The Ecological Engineering Corps has been defunct for centuries, sir. No ship of theirs remains in working order, save the *Ark* alone. The science is largely forgotten. Techniques of cloning and genetic engineering such as they practiced exist now only on Prometheus and Old Earth itself, where such secrets are closely guarded." Tuf looked across to where Dax sat before the gently winking lights of the computer consoles. "And yet, Dax, Herold Norn feels my price excessive."

"Fifty thousand," Norn said. "We can barely meet that price."

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

"Eighty thousand, then! I can go no higher. The House of Norn will bankrupt! They will tear down our bronze ironfangs, and seal the Norn Gate!"

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

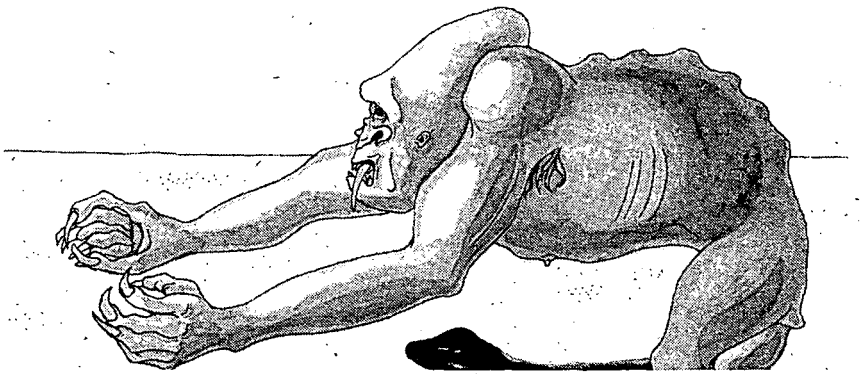
"Curse you! A hundred thousand, yes, yes. But only if your monster meets our requirements."

"The full sum on delivery."

"Impossible!"

Tuf was silent again.

"Oh, very well."



"As to the monster itself, I have studied your requirements closely, and have consulted my computers. On the *Ark*, in frozen cell-banks, thousands upon thousands of predators exist, many now extinct on their original homeworlds. Yet few would satisfy the demands of the Bronze Arena. And of those that might, many are unsuitable. For example, I limited the selection to beasts that might with luck be bred on the lands of the House of Norn. A creature who could not replicate himself would be a poor investment. No matter how

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invincible, in time the animal would age and die, and Norn victories be at an end."

"An excellent point," Herold Norn said. "We have attempted to raise lizard–lions and feridians and other beasts of the Twelve Houses, with ill success. The climate, the vegetation . . ." He made a gesture.

"Precisely. Therefore, I have eliminated silicon–based lifeforms, which would die on your carbon–based world. Also, animals of planets whose atmosphere varies too greatly. Also, beasts of dissimilar climes. You comprehend the various and sundry difficulties incumbent in my search."

"Yes, but get to the point. What have you found? What is the hundred-thousand-standard monster?"

"I offer you a selection," Tuf said. "From among some thirty animals. Attend!"

He touched a glowing button on the arm of his chair, and suddenly a beast was squatting on the blue–metal plate between them. Two meters tall with rubbery pink–grey skin and thin white hair, the creature had a low forehead and a swinish snout, plus a set of nasty curving horns and dagger–like claws.

"I will not trouble you with species names, since I observe that informality was the rule of the Bronze Arena," Haviland Tuf said. "This is the so–called stalking–swine of Heydey. Chiefly a carrion–eater, but it has been known to relish fresh meat, and fights viciously when attacked. Said to be quite intelligent, yet impossible to domesticate. The stalking–swine is an excellent breeder. The colonists from Gulliver eventually abandoned the Heydey settlement because of this animal some two hundred years past."

Herold Norn scratched his scalp between dark hair and brass coronet. "It's too thin, too light. Look at the neck! Think what a feridian would do to it." He shook his head violently. "Besides, it is *ugly*. And I resent the offer of a scavenger, no matter how ill–tempered. The House of Norn breeds proud fighters, beasts who kill their own game!"

"So," said Tuf. He touched the button, and the stalking–swine vanished. In its place, bulking large enough to touch the plates above and fade into them, was a massive ball of armored grey flesh featureless as battle plate.

"This creature's homeworld has never been named, nor settled. A team from Old Poseidon once explored it, and cell samples were taken. Zoo specimens existed briefly, but did not thrive. The beast was nicknamed the rolleram. Adults weigh approximately six metric tons. On the plains of their homeworld, the rollerams achieve speed in excess of fifty kilometers per standard hour, crushing prey beneath them. The beast is all mouth. Thusly, as any portion of its skin can be made to exude digestive enzymes, it simply rests atop its meal until the meat has been absorbed."

Herold Norn, himself half–immersed in the looming holograph, sounded impressed. "Ah, yes. Better, much better. An awesome creature. Perhaps . . . ." His tone changed suddenly. "No, no, this will never do. A creature weighing six tons and rolling that fast might smash its way out of the Bronze Arena, and kill hundreds of patrons. Besides, who would pay hard coin to watch this

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thing crush a lizard–lion or a strangler? No. No sport. Your rolleram is *too* monstrous, Tuf."

Tuf, unmoved, hit the button once again. The vast grey bulk gave way to a sleek, snarling cat, fully as large as an ironfang, with slitted yellow eyes and powerful muscles bunched beneath dark blue fur. The fur was striped, long thin lines of bright silver running lengthwise down the creature's flanks.

"Ahhhhhhhh," Norn said. "A beauty, in truth."

"The cobalt panther of Celia's World," Tuf said, "often called the cobalcat. Largest and deadliest of the great cats, or their analogues. The beast is a superlative hunter, a miracle of biologic engineering. It can see into the infrared for night prowling, and the ears–note the size and the spread–are extremely sensitive. Being felinoid, the cobalcat has psionic ability, but this ability is far more developed than the usual. Fear, hunger, and bloodlust all act as triggers; then the cobalcat becomes a mind-reader."

Norn looked up, startled. "What?"

"Psionics, sir. Psionics. The cobalcat is very deadly, simply because it knows what moves an antagonist will make before those moves are made. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes." Norn's voice was excited. Haviland Tuf looked at Dax, and the big tomcat–who'd been not the least disturbed by the parade of scentless phantoms flashing on and off–confirmed the thin man's enthusiasm as genuine. "Perfect, perfect! I'd venture to say that we can even train these beasts as we'd train ironfangs, eh? Eh? And *mindreaders!* Perfect. Even the colors are right, dark blue, you know, and our ironfangs were blue-black, so the cats will be most Nornic, yes, yes!"

Tuf touched his chair arm, and the cobalcat vanished. "So then, no need to proceed further. Delivery will be in three weeks, if that pleases you. I will provide three pair, two of younglings who should be released as breeding stock, and one mated set full-grown, who might be immediately sent into the Bronze Arena."

"So soon," Norn began. "Fine, but . . ."

"I use the stasis field. Reversed, it produces chronic distortion, time acceleration if you will. Standard procedure. Promethean techniques would require that you wait until the clones aged to maturity naturally, which is sometimes inconvenient. It would perhaps be prudent to add that, although I provide Norn with six animals, only three actual individuals are represented. The *Ark* carries a triple cobalcat cell. I will clone each specimen twice, male and female, and hope for a viable genetic mix when they crossbreed on Lyronica."

Dax filled Tuf's head with a flood of triumph, confusion and impatience; Herold Norn, then, had understood nothing of what Tuf had said, or at any rate that was one interpretation. "Fine," Norn said. "I will send ships for the animals promptly, with proper cages. Then we will pay you."

Dax radiated deceit, distrust, alarm.

"Sir. You will pay the full fee before any beasts are handed over."

"But you said on delivery."

"Admitted. Yet I am given to impulsive whims, and impulse now tells me to collect first, rather than simultaneously."

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"Oh, very well," Norn said. "Though your demands are arbitrary and excessive. With these cobalcats, we shall soon recoup our fee." He started to rise.

Haviland Tuf raised a finger. "One moment. You have not seen fit to inform me of the ecology of Lyronica, nor the particular realms of Norn House. Perhaps prey exists. I must caution you, however, that your cobalcats will not breed unless hunting is good. They need suitable game species."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Let me add this. For an additional five thousand standards, I might clone you a breeding stock of Celian hoppers, furred herbivores renowned for their succulent flesh."

Herold Norn frowned. "You ought to give them to us without charge. You have extorted enough money, and . . . ."

Tuf rose, and gave a ponderous shrug. "The man berates me, Dax," he said to his cat. "What am I to do? I seek only an honest living." He looked at Norn. "Another of my impulses comes to me. I feel that you will not relent, even were I to offer an excellent discount. Therefore I yield. The hoppers are yours without charge."

"Good. Excellent." Norn turned toward the door. "We shall take them at the same time as the cobalcats, and release them about the estates."

Haviland Tuf and Dax followed him from the chamber, and they rode in silence back to Norn's ship.

4

The fee was sent up by the House of Norn the day before delivery was due. The following afternoon, men in black and gray ascended to the *Ark*, and carried six tranquilized cobalcats to the waiting cages in their ships. Tuf bid them a passive farewell, and heard no more from Herold Norn. But he kept the *Ark* in orbit about Lyronica.

Less than three of Lyronica's short days passed before Tuf observed his clients had slated a cobalcat for a bout in the Bronze Arena. On the appointed evening, he disguised himself as best a man such as he could disguise himself—with false beard, shoulder-length wig of red hair, gaudy puff-sleeved suit of canary yellow and furred turban—and shuttled down with hope of escaping attention. When the match was called (third on the schedule), Tuf was sitting in the back of the Arena, a rough stone wall against his shoulders, a narrow wooden seat attempting to support his weight.

"Third match," the announcer cried, even as workers pulled off the scattered meaty chunks of the loser in the second. "From the House of Varcour, a female lizard-lion, nine months, weight 1.4 quintals, trained by Junior Beast-Master Ammari y Varcour Otheni. Once a veteran of the Bronze Arena, once surviving." Customers close to Tuf began to cheer and wave their hands wildly—he had chosen to enter by the Varcour Gate this time, walking down green concrete, through the maw of a monstrous golden lizard. Far away and below, a green-gold enameled door slid up. Tuf lifted binoculars to his eyes; the lizard-lion scrabbled forward—two meters of scaled green reptile with a whip-like tail thrice its own length and the long snout of an Old

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Earth alligator. Its jaws opened and closed soundlessly, displaying impressive teeth.

"The House of Norn, imported from offworld for your amusement, a female cobalcat. Aged–aged three weeks." The announcer paused. "Aged three years," he said at last, "weight 2.3 quintals, trained by Senior Beast-Master Herold Norn. New to the Bronze Arena." The metallic dome overhead rang to the cacophonous cheering of the Norn sector; Herold Norn had packed the Bronze Arena with his housemen and tourists betting the gray and black standard.

The cobalcat came from the darkness with cautious fluid grace, and its great golden eyes swept the arena. It was every bit what Tuf had promised; a bundle of deadly muscle and frozen motion, blue with but a single silvery streak. Its growl could scarcely be heard, so far was Tuf from the action, but he saw its mouth gape through his glasses.

The lizard-lion saw it too, and came waddling forward, short scaled legs kicking in the sand, long impossible tail arched above it like the sting of some reptilian scorpion. Then, when the cobalcat turned its liquid eyes on the enemy, the lizard-lion brought the tail forward and down with a bone-breaking crack. But the cobalcat had smoothly slipped to one side and nothing shattered but air and sand.

The cat circled, yawning. The lizard-lion, implacable, turned and raised its tail again, opened its jaws, lunged forward. The cobalcat avoided both teeth and whip. Again the tail cracked; and again the cat was too quick. Someone in the audience began to moan the killing chant, others picked it up; Tuf turned his binoculars, and saw swaying in the Norn seats. The lizard-lion gnashed its long jaws in frenzy, smashed its whip across the nearest entry door, and began to thrash.

The cobalcat, sensing an opening, moved behind its enemy with a graceful leap, pinned the struggling lizard with one great blue paw, and clawed the soft greenish flanks and belly to ribbons. After a time and a few futile snaps of its whip that only distracted the cat, the lizard-lion lay still.

The Norns were cheering very loudly. Haviland Tuf–huge, full-bearded and gaudily dressed–rose and left.

5

Weeks passed; the *Ark* remained in orbit around Lyronica. Haviland Tuf listened to results from the Bronze Arena on his ship's comm, and noted that the cobalcats were winning match after match. Herold Norn still lost a contest on occasion–when he used an ironfang to fill up his Arena obligations–but defeats were easily outweighed by victories.

Tuf sat with Dax curled in his lap, drank tankards of brown ale from the *Ark* brewery, and waited.

About a month later, a ship rose to meet him; slim, needle-prowed, green and gold. It docked, after comm contact, and Tuf met the visitors with Dax in his arms. The cat read them as friendly, so he activated no defenses.

There were four, all dressed in armor of scaled gold metal and green enamel. Three stood at attention. The fourth, florid and corpulent with a golden helmet and a bright green

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plume to conceal his baldness, stepped forward and offered a meaty hand.

"Your intent is appreciated," Tuf told him, keeping both hands firmly on Dax, "but I do not care to touch. I do require your name and business, sir."

"Morho y Varcour Otheni," the leader began.

Tuf raised one palm. "So. And you are Senior Beast-Master of the House of Varcour, come to buy a monster. Enough. I knew it all the while, I must confess. I merely wished to determine if you would tell the truth."

The fat Beast-Master's mouth puckered.

"Your housemen should remain here," Tuf said, turning. "Follow me."

Haviland Tuf let Morho y Varcour Otheni utter scarcely a word until they were alone in the computer room, sitting diagonally opposite. "You heard of me from the Norns," Tuf said then. "Is that not correct?"

Morho smiled toothily. "Indeed we did. A Norn houseman was persuaded to reveal the source of their cobalcats. To our delight, your *Ark* was still in orbit. You seem to have found Lyronica diverting?"

"Problems exist. I hope to help. Your problem, for example. Varcour is now the last and least of the Twelve Great Houses. Your lizard–lions fail to awe me, and your realms are chiefly swampland. Choice of combatants become therefore limited. Have I divined the essence of your complaint?"

"Hmpf. Yes, indeed. You anticipate me, sir. But you do it well. We were holding our own well enough until you interfered; we have not taken a match from Norn since, and they were previously our chiefest victims. A few paltry wins over Wrai Hill and Amar Island, a lucky score against Feridian, a pair of death-draws with Arneth and Sin Doon–that has been our lot this past month. Pfui. We cannot survive. They will make me a Brood-Tender and ship me back to the estates unless I act."

Tuf quieted Morho with an upraised hand. "No need to speak further. Your distress is noted. In the time since I have helped Herold Norn, I have been fortunate enough to be gifted with a great deal of leisure. Accordingly, as an exercise of the mind, I have been able to devote myself to the problems of the Great Houses, each in its turn. We need not waste time. I can solve your present difficulties. There will be cost, however."

Morho grinned. "I am prepared. I heard about your prices. High, there is no arguing, but we are prepared to pay, if you can . . . ."

"Sir," Tuf said, "I am a man of charity. Norn was a poor house, Herold almost a beggar. In mercy, I gave him a low price. The domains of Varcour are richer, its standards brighter, its victories more wildly sung. For you, I must charge three hundred thousand standards, to make up for the losses I suffered dealing with Norn."

Morho made a shocked sound, and his scales gave metallic blinks as he shifted in his seat. "Too much, too much," he protested. "I implore you. Truly, we are more glorious than Norn, but not so great as you suppose. To pay this price of yours, we must need starve. Lizard–lions would run over our battlements. Our

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towns would sink on their stilts, until the swamp mud covered them over and the children drowned."

Tuf was looking at Dax. "Quite so," he said, when his glance went back to Morho. "You touch me deeply. Two hundred thousand standards."

Morho began to protest and implore again, but this time Tuf merely sat silently, arms on their armrests, until the Beast-Master, red-faced, sweating, finally ran down and agreed.

Tuf punched his control arm. The image of a great lizard materialized; it stood three meters tall, covered in grey–green plate scales and standing on two thick clawed legs. Its head, atop a short neck, was large enough, the jaws great enough, to take off a man's head and shoulders in a single chomp. But the creature's most remarkable features were its forelegs; short thick ropes of muscle ornamented by meter-long spurs of discolored bone.

"The *tris neryei* of Cable's Landing," Tuf said, "or so it was named by the Fyndii, whose colonists preceded men on that world by a millenium. The term translates, literally, as 'living knife.' Also called the bladed tyrant, referring to the beast's resemblance to the tyrannosaur, a long-extinct reptile of Old Earth. A superficial resemblance. The *tris neryei* is a far more efficient carnivore than the tyrannosaur ever was, due to its terrible forelegs, swords of bone that it uses with a frightful instinctive ferocity."

Morho was leaning forward and Dax filled Tuf's head with hot enthusiasm. "Excellent!" the Beast-Master said, "though the names are a bit long-winded. We shall call them tyrannoswords, eh?"

"Call them what you will, it matters not to me. The animals have many obvious advantages for the House of Varcour," Tuf said. "Should you take them, I will throw in–without any additional charge–a breeding stock of Cathadayn tree-slugs. You will find that . . . ."

6

Tuf followed the news from the Bronze Arena, although he never again ventured to the soil of Lyronica. The cobalcats continued to sweep all before them; in the latest featured encounter, one of the Norn beasts had destroyed a prime Arneth strangling-ape and an Amar Island fleshfrog during a special triple match.

But Varcour fortunes were also on the upswing; the newly-introduced tyrannoswords had proved a Bronze Arena sensation, with their booming cries and their heavy tread, and the relentless death of their bone-swords. In three matches so far, a huge feridian, a water-scorpion, and a Gnethin spidercat had all proved unequal to the Varcour lizards. Morho y Varcour Otheni was reported ecstatic. Next week, tyrannosword would face cobalcat in a struggle for supremacy, and a packed arena was being predicted.

Herold Norn called up once, shortly after the tyrannoswords had scored their first victory. "Tuf!" he said sternly, "you were not to sell to the other Houses."

Haviland Tuf sat calmly, petting Dax. "No such matter was ever discussed. Your own monsters perform as expected. Do you complain because another now shares your good fortune?"

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"Yes. No. That is–well, never mind. I suppose I can't stop you. If the other Houses get animals that beat our cats, however, you will provide us with something that can beat whatever you sell *them*. Understand?"

"Of course." He looked down at Dax. "Herold Norn now questions my comprehension." Then up again. "I will always sell, if you have the price."

Norn scowled on the comm screen. "Yes, yes. Well, by then our victories should have mounted high enough to afford whatever outlandish price you intend to charge."

"I trust that all goes well otherwise?" Tuf said.

"Well, yes and no. In the Arena, yes, yes, definitely. But otherwise, well, that was what I called about. The four young cats don't seem interested in breeding, for some reason. And our Brood–Tender keeps complaining that they are getting thin. He doesn't think they're healthy. Now, I can't say personally, as I'm here in the City and the animals are back on the plains around Norn House. But some worry does exist. The cats run free, of course, but we have tracers on them, so we can . . ."

Tuf raised a hand. "It is no doubt not mating season for the cobalcats."

"That makes sense. Just a question of time then, I suppose. The other question I wanted to go over concerned these hoppers of yours. We set them loose, you know, and they have demonstrated no difficulty whatever in breeding. The ancestral Norn grasslands have been chewed bare. It is very annoying. They hop about everywhere. What are we to do?"

"Breed the cobalcats," Tuf suggested. "They are excellent predators, and will check the hopper plague."

Herold Norn looked puzzled, and mildly distressed. "Yes, yes," he said.

He started to say something else, but Tuf rose. "I fear I must end our conversation," he said. "A shuttleship has entered into docking orbit with the *Ark*. Perhaps you would recognize it. It is blue-steel, with large triangular grey wings."

"The House of Wrai Hill!" Norn said.

"Fascinating," said Tuf. "Good day."

7

Beast–Master Denis Lon Wrai paid three hundred thousand standards for his monster, an immensely powerful red–furred ursoid from the hills of Vagabond. Haviland Tuf sealed the transaction with a brace of scamper-sloth eggs.

The week following, four men in orange silk and flame-red capes visited the *Ark*. They returned to the House of Feridian four hundred fifty thousand standards poorer, with a contract for the delivery of six great armored poison–elk, plus a gift herd of Hrangan grass pigs.

The Beast–Master of Sin Doon received a giant serpent; the emissary from Amar Island was pleased by his godzilla. Dant seniors in milk-white robes and silver buckles delighted in the slavering garghoul that Haviland Tuf offered them, with a trifling gift. And so, one by one, each of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica sought him out, received its monster, paid the ever–increasing price.

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By that time, both of Norn's fighting cobalcats were dead; the first sliced easily in two by the bone–sword of a Varcour tyrannosword, the second crushed between the massive clawed paws of a Wrai Hill ursoid (though the ursoid too had died)–if the great cats had espied their fate, they had proved unable to avoid it. Herold Norn had been calling daily, but Tuf had instructed his computer to refuse the calls.

Finally, with eleven Houses as past customers, Haviland Tuf sat across the computer room from Danel Leigh Arneth, Senior Beast–Master of Arneth–in–the–Gilded–Wood, once greatest and proudest of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica, now last and least. Arneth was immensely tall, standing even with Tuf himself, but had none of Tuf's fat; his skin was hard ebony, all muscle, face a hawk–nosed axe, hair short and iron grey. The Beast–Master came to the conference in cloth–of–gold, crimson belt and boots, a tiny crimson beret aslant upon his head. He carried a trainer's pain–prod like a walking stick.

Dax read immense hostility in the man, treachery, and barely suppressed rage. Accordingly, Haviland Tuf carried a small laser strapped to his stomach just beneath his greatcoat.

"The strength of Arneth–in–the–Gilded–Wood has always been in variety," Danel Leigh Arneth said. "When the other Houses of Lyronica threw all their fortunes on the backs of a single beast, our fathers and grandfathers worked with dozens. Against any animal of theirs, we had an optimal choice, a strategy. That has been our greatness and our pride. But we can have no strategy against these demon–beasts of yours, trader. No matter which of our hundred fighters we send onto the sand, it comes back dead. We are forced to deal with you."

"Not so," said Haviland Tuf. "I force no one. Still, look at my stock. Perhaps fortune will see fit to give you back your strategic options." He touched the buttons on his chair, and a parade of monsters came and went before the eyes of the Arneth Beast–Master; creatures furred and scaled and feathered and covered by armor plate, beasts of hill and forest and lake and plain, predators and scavengers and deadly herbivores of sizes great and small. And Danel Leigh Arneth, his lips pressed tightly together, finally ordered four each of the dozen largest and deadliest species, at a cost of some two million standards.

The conclusion of the transaction–complete, as with all the other Houses, with a gift of some small harmless animal–did nothing to soothe Arneth's foul temper. "Tuf," he said when the dealing was over, "you are a clever and devious man, but you do not fool me."

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

"You have made yourself immensely wealthy, and you have cheated all who bought from you and thought to profit. The Norns, for example–their cobalcats are worthless.

"They were a poor House; your price brought them to the edge of bankruptcy, just as you have done to all of us. They thought to recoup through victories. Bah! There will be no Norn victories now! Each House that you have sold to gained the edge on those who purchased previously.

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Thus Arneth, the last to purchase, remains the greatest House of all. Our monsters will wreak devastation. The sands of the Bronze Arena will darken with the blood of the lesser beasts."

Tuf's hands locked on the bulge of his stomach. His face was placid.

"You have changed nothing! The Great Houses remain, Arneth the greatest and Norn the least. All you have done is bleed us, like the profiteer you are, until every lord must struggle and scrape to get by. The Houses now wait for victory, pray for victory, depend on victory, but all the victories will be Arneth's. We alone have not been cheated, because I thought to buy last and thus best."

"So," said Haviland Tuf. "You are then a wise and sagacious Beast–Master, if this indeed is the case. Yet I deny that I have cheated anyone."

"Don't play with words!" Arneth roared. "Henceforth you will deal no longer with the Great Houses. Norn has no money to buy from you again, but if they did, you would not sell to them. *Do you understand?* We will not go round and round forever."

"Of course," Tuf said. He looked at Dax. "Now Danel Leigh Arneth imputes my understanding. I am always misunderstood." His calm gaze returned to the angry Beast–Master. "Your point, sir, is well–taken. Perhaps it is time for me to leave Lyronica. In any event, I shall not deal with Norn again, nor with any of the Great Houses. This is a foolish impulse–by thus acting I foreswear great profits–but I am a gentle man much given to following my whim. Obedient to the esteemed Danel Leigh Arneth, I bow to your demand."

Dax reported wordlessly that Arneth was pleased and pacified; he had cowed Tuf, and won the day for his House. His rivals would get no new champions. Once again, the Bronze Arena would be predictable. He left satisfied.

Three weeks later, a fleet of twelve glittering gold–flecked shuttles arrived to remove the purchases of Danel Leigh Arneth. Haviland Tuf, stroking a limp lazy Dax, saw them off, then returned down the long corridors of the *Ark* to his control room, to take a call from Herold Norn.

The thin Beast–Master looked positively skeletal. "Tuf!" he exclaimed. "Everything is going wrong. You must help."

"Wrong? I solved your problem."

Norn pressed his features together in a grimace, and scratched beneath his brass coronet. "No, no, listen. The cobalcats are all dead, or sick. Four of them dead in the Bronze Arena–we knew the second pair were too young, but when the first couple lost, there was nothing else to do. It was that or go back to ironfangs. Now we have only two left. They don't eat much–catch a few hoppers, but noth-

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ing else. And we can't train them, either. A trainer comes into the pen with a pain-prod, and the damn cats know what he intends. They're always a move head, you understand? In the arena, they won't respond to the killing chant at all. It's *terrible*. The worst thing is they don't even breed. We need *more* of them. What are we supposed to enter in the gaming pits?"

"It is not cobalcat breeding season," Tuf said.

"When *is* their breeding season?"

"A fascinating question. Pity you did not ask sooner. As I understand, the female cobalt panther goes into heat each spring, when the snowtufts blossom on Celia's World. Some type of biological trigger is involved."

"You *planned* this. Lyronica has no snowthings whatever. Now I suppose you intend charging us a fortune for these flowers."

"Sir. Of course not. Were the option mine, I would gladly give them to you. Your plight wounds me. I am concerned. However, as it happens, I have given my word to Danel Leigh Arneth to deal no more with the Great Houses of Lyronica." He shrugged hopelessly.

"We won victories with your cats," Norn said, an edge of desperation in his voice. "Our treasury has been growing–we have forty thousand standards now. It is yours. Sell us these flowers. Or better, a new animal. Bigger. Fiercer. I saw the Dant garghouls. Sell us something like that. We have nothing to enter in the Bronze Arena!"

"No? What of your ironfangs? The pride of Norn, I was told."

Herold Norn waved impatiently. "We have been having problems. These hoppers eat anything, everything. They've gotten out of control. Millions, all over, eating the grass, and the crops. The things they've done to farmland–the cobalcats love them, yes, but we don't have enough cobalcats. And the wild ironfangs won't touch the hoppers. They don't like the taste. But, you understand, all the other grass–eaters left, driven out by these hoppers of yours, and the ironfangs went with them. Where, I don't know that either. Gone, though. Into the unclaimed lands, beyond the realms of Norn. There are some villages out there, a few farmers, but they hate the Great Houses. Tamberkin, all of them, don't even have dog fights. They'll probably try to *tame* the ironfangs, if they see them."

"So," said Tuf. "But then you have your kennels, do you not?"

"Not any more," Norn said. He sounded very harried. "I ordered them shut. The ironfangs were losing every match, especially after you began to sell to the other Houses. It seemed a foolish waste to maintain dead weight. Beisdes, the expense–we needed every standard. You bled us dry. We had Arena fees to pay, and of course we had to wager, and lately we've had to buy some food from Tamber just to feed all our housemen and trainers. I mean, you would never *believe* the things the hoppers have done to our crops."

"Sir," said Tuf. "You insult me. I am an ecologist. I know a great deal of hoppers and their ways. Am I to understand that you shut your ironfang kennels?"

"Yes, yes. We turned the useless things loose, and now they're gone

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with the rest. What are we going to do? The hoppers are overrunning the plains, the cats won't mate, and our money will run out if we must continue to import food and pay Arena fees without hope of victory."

Tuf folded his hands together. "You do indeed face a series of delicate problems. And I am the very man to help you to their solution. Unfortunately, I have pledged my bond to Danel Leigh Arneth."

"Is it hopeless, then? Tuf, I am a man begging, I a Senior Beast–Master of Norn. Soon we will drop from the games entirely. We will have no funds for Arena fees or betting, no animals to enter. We are cursed by ill fortune. No Great House has ever failed to provide its allotment of fighters, not even Feridian during its Twelve-Year Drought. We will be shamed. The House of Norn will sully its proud history by sending dogs and cats onto the sand, to be shredded ignominiously by the huge monsters that you have sold the other Houses."

"Sir," Tuf said. "If you will permit me an impertinent remark, and one perhaps without foundation, I will give you my opinion. I have a hunch–yes, that is the proper word–a hunch that the monsters you fear may be in short supply in the weeks and months to come. For example, the adolescent ursoids of Vagabond may very shortly go into hibernation. They are less than a year old, you understand. I hope the lords of Wrai Hill are not disconcerted by this, yet I fear they may be. Vagabond, as I'm sure you are aware, has an extremely irregular orbit about its primary, so that its Long Winters last approximately twenty standard years. The ursoids are attuned to this cycle. Soon their body processes will slow to almost nothing–some have mistaken a sleeping ursoid for a dead one, you know–and I don't think they will be easily awakened. Perhaps, as the trainers of Wrai Hill are men of good character and keen intellect, they might find a way. But I would be strongly inclined to suspect that most of their energies and their funds will be devoted to feeding their populace, in the light of the voracious appetities of scampersloths. In quite a like manner, the men of the House of Varcour will be forced to deal with an explosion of Cathadayn tree–slugs. The tree–slugs are particularly fascinating creatures. At one point in their life cycle, they become veritable sponges, and double in size. A large enough grouping is fully capable of drying up even an extensive swampland." Tuf paused, and his thick fingers beat in drumming rhythms across his stomach. "I ramble unconscionably. Sir. Do you grasp my point, though? My thrust?"

Herold Norn looked like a dead man. "You are mad. You have destroyed us. Our economy, our ecology . . . but *why?* We paid you fairly. The Houses, the Houses . . . no beasts, no funds. How can the games go on? *No one* will send fighters to the Bronze Arena!"

Haviland Tuf raised his hands in shock. "Really?" he said.

Then he turned off the communicator and rose. Smiling a tiny tight–lipped smile, he began to talk to Dax. **George R.R. Martin**

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MARTIAN "RIVERS"—the dry, stream-like channels discovered by the Mariner and Viking missions—may have been caused by flowing oil, according to Caltech geophysicist Yuk L. Yung. If Mars had a methane atmosphere early in its history, as current theories of the evolution of the solar system suggest, conditions might have been suitable for the conversion of some of the methane to free methyl radicals. The radicals could then polymerize into more complex hydrocarbons which would be liquid at the prevailing temperatures and pressures. These oil—like liquids would then fall as rain, and the run—off would form the observed channels.

PARTICLE-BEAM WEAPONS, a real—world version of that old sf stand—by the death ray, may come out of a Department of Defense study of what is euphemistically referred to as "directed—energy technology," according to *Aviation Week.* The particle—beam weapons, intended primarily for use against missiles and satellites, operate on the same principles as the particle accelerators used in nuclear research. But instead of directing the beam into a target in the laboratory to study resulting nuclear reactions, the weapon would shoot the beam tens or hundreds of kilometers to destroy an enemy satellite or re—entry vehicle. The beam could consist of charged particles such as electrons or protons, or neutral atoms, most likely hydrogen.

INTENSE SUNSPOT ACTIVITY can be expected within the next year, as the peak of the current 11—year sunspot cycle approaches. While the previous peak, in 1969, was not particularly spectacular, the one before that, in 1958, was the strongest in the two—hundred—year history of sunspot observations, and current data suggest that the up—coming peak may equal or surpass that level.

PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA do not seem to be associated with unusual electromagnetic activity, according to E. Balanovski

(Continued on page 87)

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Because the mind is a higher system composed of complex subsystems, once in a while a "rare event" occurs which cannot be explained or duplicated easily. These "rare events" seem to occur more often when the subject is not in a "normal" state (whatever that is!). At the present, we consider such a subject to be in an "altered state of consciousness."

One way to achieve an ASC is to suffer from a mental or physical health problem. Literature on psychic and occult phenomena is full of instances and, so far as I am aware, these aspects have not been thoroughly investigated. Central-nervous-system disturbances are often associated with unexplained phenomena.

In a sick person the phenomena may be spontaneous, out of control and undesirable. Factors show up that have been associated with psychic phenomena, such as low-frequency, high-amplitude brain waves. In a large number of cases, for example, those with Familial Periodic Disease (FPD–a type of periodic flaccid paralysis) show evidence of psychic ability. The following excerpts are from personal correspondence with physicians and patients:

". . .In patients there are preponderant 4-to-6-cycle-per-second brain waves, apparently originating in the hypothalamus. In about 90% of the patients, questioning reveals definite evidence of ESP ability. In some of the remaining 10% a sort of "reverse psychokinesis' seems active. This is the sort of thing that 'if there are 10,000 people in the stadium and one seagull flies over, guess who gets crapped on. . . . N.T. (M.D.)."

". . .I am interested in information you may have on this disease as my sister and I have it. We have had no luck finding a doctor who knows anything about it, much less the treatment. My sister has always been extremely gifted (or cursed) with the phenomena of

(Continued on page 84)

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(Continued from page 83)

astral projection, seeing auras, spontaneous trances, etc. Mine is limited to being very intuitive about people, thoughts, emotions". . . .W.F. (This person is female, an attorney, and a writer of very meaningful 'automatic poetry.' She feels it is similar to switching on a radio and just picking it up. . . .J.B.)

The Dreyfus Medical Foundation, 2 Broadway, New York 10004, has pioneered the extensive investigations into useful applications of diphenylhydantoin (DPH/Dilantin) –above and beyond its use in control of epileptic seizures–for conditions ranging from skin scleroderma to heart irregularity. A letter in one of their publications states:

". . .I have had thoughts that could not be dismissed from my mind, no matter how hard I tried. Very commonly there would be a metallic taste in my mouth. A tingling sensation in my extremities, but worst of all was the unexplained depression and periodic paralysis. Our family, going back at least three generations, had suffered with recurring paralysis . . . and confusion, with many thoughts at the same time (even though many were extremely bright), was all part of the clinical picture. Three days after Dilantin was prescribed, taking 100 milligrams per day, I feel noticeably stronger, less anxious, more energetic and, best of all, the paralysis attacks seem to have been aborted . . . our heartfelt thanks. . . ."

After my visit to the Dreyfus Foundation, I sent all the information to W.F.; she replied:

"Started taking 100 mg of Dilantin per day plus sugar-free diet and two tablespoons potassium chloride. Feel much, much better. It also has brought about an increase in energy, allowing me to accomplish twice as much as before. I don't know how I can ever thank you enough, but if I can ever be of service to you or anyone else, please let me know."

Other "psychic symptoms from sick sensitives" have been investigated by (1) Baron von Reichenback in the 19th century (hypersensitive to magnetic fields), and The Psychical Research Foundation in Durham, N.C. (poltergeist phenomena from individuals with epilepsy and central nervous system disorders).

Some of these symptoms, while interesting and helpful from a psychic standpoint, are most undesirable from a physical standpoint, and are scary to the person involved. The drug Dilantin seems to be the best control for the undesirable physical and mental effects, with the least drug side effects.

–Jim Beal

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The Depression of 1980

One of the houses on Santa Clara Drive was brightly lit for Christmas Eve. It was one of the larger houses, with an indoor greenhouse jutting out in a bay on one side and a pool in back. There were guards all around the house, lots of them. It was quiet and cold outside, and the guards weren't happy at all about being there. They were happy to have uniforms and jobs, but they didn't have pistols in case an angry mob came to flame the place. They didn't have nightsticks. They didn't have anything except gloved hands. And there was a street fight going on inside the house.

A big spruce tree stood in one corner of the parlor, decorated with ornaments that had been in the Shockley family for three generations. Four big red-felt stockings hung from the fireplace across the room. In between, all the furniture had been removed and the expensive Oriental rug rolled up. The Shockley family, Jerome and Lynn and their children, Byron, Lisa, Jeffrey, and Kathy, sat on the carpeted steps of the grand staircase in the foyer, talking. A young man, bearded, scruffy, shabbily dressed, turned and spoke. "We're ready," he said. "We'll do you whatever you want."

Shockley nodded. "All right, kids," he said, "upstairs to bed."

"Aw," said Lisa.

"Go upstairs. Santa's coming." After the children had reluctantly gone to their rooms, Shockley looked at the youth in the leather jacket. "I don't want anyone really getting hurt, you understand. My insurance company would kill me." One of the other boys laughed.

Lynn Shockley had objected to letting the gang into her house. "Then why not let the children watch?" she had said angrily. "It's just like television to them. What is this, a new

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kind of caroling?''

''That's exactly what it is,'' said Shockley. ''These boys aren't going to stand around and sing 'Silent Night.' And nobody else who comes here tonight is going to be nice enough to knock on our door before he comes in.''

So the Shockleys had an evening's entertainment on Christmas Eve. There were twelve youths in all, divided evenly into two teams or gangs. One suffered an accidental knife wound in the forearm and bled on the Shockley's clean floor. Another was kicked in the throat and had to be dragged to one side, as there was barely enough room as it was. A third suffered a tremendous blow from a tire chain across the face, and he lay motionless near the tree. After half an hour, Jerome Shockley stood and walked toward the battling youths. ''Thank you, thank you, Merry Christmas,'' he said. He had found the spectacle arousing, almost unpleasantly so.

The two gangs stood still, panting. ''Merry Christmas,'' said one young man, bruised and exhausted.

Shockley took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and held it out to the boy. They looked at each other for a moment.

''We don't want that,'' said the youth.

''What?'' said Shockley, bewildered.

''We can't get nothing for that. Nobody takes that where we come from. We live in a shanty town in Prospect Park. Paper money don't do us no good at all. You give us all enough to eat. We haven't eaten today.''

''But–''

''That I can handle,'' said another youth. ''We give you the only thing we can that you'd understand. Your money you can blow your nose in.''

Lynn Shockley looked upset. Her husband was standing in the parlor, stammering and confused. His wife stood. ''I'll see what the cook can spare.''

''You do that, lady,'' said a third youth.

Later, after the gang had left the house with what they wanted, plus a few of the Shockleys' more portable furnishings, the man and woman sat together by the fireplace. Both seemed stunned.

''I should have seen it coming,'' said Shockley. ''The entertainment in the clubs. Starving people degrading themselves for money. The New Society, they call it in the magazines, sitting around sipping coffee and watching pre-teen girls being raped for cash.''

''They live in the park,'' said Lynn Shockley. ''They live in tents in the streets. They overturn buses and live in them. They can't afford food, so they take it. I understand that. We've had a collapse. But why come here? Why can't they leave us alone?''

Shockley looked up. He shook his head. ''Property doesn't mean anything anymore, Lynn. I just understood what that means. These people go live in a public park because they don't believe in the concept of a 'park' any longer. They become squatters on estates because they don't accept private ownership of land. They take what they want because they don't think anyone has the right to keep what they need from them. They could come here . . . any time.''

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They were silent for a moment. A radio upstairs played Christmas music. "Jerry?" said Lynn Shockley after a while. "Jerry? What about all the property you invested in? You put a lot of our money in real estate."

"It will be gone soon. It won't be worth a thing. Property is worthless, money is worthless."

"And the gold? And the paintings?"

"I thought I was smart," he said bitterly, "because I didn't go into the stock market. But something's valuable only as long as someone else is willing to buy it from you. I don't think anyone will be wanting paintings if this Depression goes on. Or gold. Just food, clothing, shelter. Maybe not all of those."

There was another long silence. "Jerry?" Her voice was small and very frightened now. "How long before we're downtown selling ourselves in the cafes?"

Jerome Shockley put his arm around his wife. "It will be all right," he said. He sighed. He thought about his wife and four children. He wondered which he'd offer up first.

–G. A. EFFINGER

(Continued from page 82)

and J. G. Taylor of King's College, London. Writing in the British journal *Nature*, the two researchers report the results of an experiment designed to measure electromagnetic emissions (over the entire spectral range from d.c. to gamma rays) from persons attempting various parapsychological tasks, including telekinesis, dowsing, psychic healing, and telepathy.

ARTIFICIAL PHOTOSYNTHESIS may turn out to be an ideal method for utilizing solar energy. Green plants, using water, carbon dioxide, and sunlight as inputs and chlorophyll as a catalyst, produce useful hydrocarbon fuels (for example, wood). But higher efficiencies and the production of fuels with higher energy content may eventually be possible with man—made systems. It has long been known that some metal salts in an acidic solution will give off hydrogen when exposed to ultraviolet light. To drive this reaction with sunlight (in which most of the energy is in the visible portion of the spectrum) requires the use of sensitizing dyes to absorb the lower—energy photons and transfer the energy to the reacting molecules. Additionally, a catalyst—a sort of artificial chlorophyll—would be needed to increase the reaction rate to commercially usable levels. A number of metal—organic compounds seem promising for this application.

POSITRON EMISSION from the center of our galaxy has been confirmed recently at the Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico. Using instruments on a balloon, the group detected the gamma rays given off when the positrons—which are the anti—matter equivalent of electrons—encounter normal electrons and both are annihilated. The mechanism responsible for the production of the positrons remains unknown, but possibilities include supernova explosions, the evaporation of primordial black holes, or—as always—something not yet suspected.—

—Greg Chalfin

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(Continued from page 61)
Rogers series of nine novels. The rationale covers how Buck Rogers was hurtled into the future and why the Venus and Mars of the old pulps exist and not the ones we know today.

Mr. Niven and Dr. Pournelle are series consultants and plotters; they will not do any of the actual writing. The writing will be done by *Eric Holmes,* author of MAHARS OF PELLUCIDAR. The books will be published by Ace.

Anne McCaffrey is writing music for some of the lyrics she wrote for the Dragonrider series. *Jon Anderson* of the rock group *Yes* has agreed to help her. She thought his music would be appropriate for what she had in mind.

James P. Hogan is at work on a novel tentatively titled MICROPLANET JANUS. Also in the works is a third novel in the INHERIT THE STARS/THE GENTLE GIANTS OF GANYMEDE series.

C. J. Cherryh is at work on the concluding volume in her GATE OF IVREL trilogy. Its title is FIRES OF AZEROTH.

Gerold Bailey has sold a novel to Berkley, entitled SWORD OF THE NURLINGAS.

In March Dell Books will be bringing out LAND OF UNREASON by *L. Sprague de Camp* and *Fletcher Pratt,* complete with the original *Cartier* illustrations. This is the first edition of this book to have the original illos of the magazine serialization.

THE BEST OF E. E. "DOC" SMITH will be published by Jove/HBJ Books in March.

Kate Wilhelm will have a novel out this spring entitled JUNIPER TIME.

Joe Haldeman is working on the first novel of a projected trilogy. He is also doing a non-fiction book on space travel for ST. Martin's Press entitled THE ENDLESS HORIZON.

Cynthia Felice has several new books in the works.

Mack Reynolds has sold three books to Belmont.

Bantam is printing Phyllis Gottlieb's new novel, O MASTER CALIBAN, in March.

Dave Bischoff and *Ted White* have sold a book to Popular Library.

Bantam has purchased another LOGAN'S RUN novel. This will be the third.

Octavia Butler is at work on two new novels.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro is at work on an occult-mystery novel for Putnam.

Suzee McKee Charnas is at work on volume three in the MOTHERLINES series.

David Gerrold is working on a mainstream novel entitled FOOTNOTE.

George R. R. Martin and *Lisa Tuttle* are expanding their story, "THE STORMS OF WINDHAVEN," into a novel.

Edward Bryant is finishing a novel for Pocket titled IN THE NIGHTIDE.

David Dvorkin has sold a novel to Pocket, THE ERSATZ MESSIAH.

—Elton T. Elliott

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JEM

by Fred Pohl

(Synopsis)

JEM is the first inhabitable planet to be discovered. It possesses not one intelligent race but three!

Earth's three power blocs (food countries, fuel countries and the poor-cousin people's republics) race to explore and settle it.

On the way DANNY DALEHOUSE, who comes to love the balloon-like inhabitants, meets MARJORIE MENNINGER, strong-willed daughter of a rich and politically powerful family; she is determined that she herself will be instrumental in winning JEM for the U.S.A.

After an act of sabotage results in unplanned- for casualties, the political situation between the three power blocs on JEM and Earth becomes more tense.

The three intelligent races on JEM are polarized against their will: the KRINPIT, crab-like creatures, at first accidentally killed, then deliberately imprisoned, want to drive all Earthmen from the planet; the BALLOONISTS, an air-born race secreting a hallucinogenic aphrodisiac, mistake the empathetic Dalehouse for a typical representative of his nation and align with the Food Bloc; the BURROWERS, a subterranean species opposed to any contact with those awful human beings, are forced to an alliance with the Fuel Bloc for self-protection.

And so it goes.

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XIV (Cont.)

Ten minutes later they were both back on the beach, lying, not very comfortably, on their clothes, waiting to dry. "Ouch," said Margie. "If I ever get any extra people for punishment detail, I think I'll see if they can get the rocks out of this sand."

"You get used to it."

"Only if I have to, Danny. I'm going to make this a nice camp if I can—good duty. For instance, you know what we're going to have tonight?"

He rolled his head to look at her. "What?"

"The first official Jemman Food-Exporting Bloc encampment dance."

"A *dance*?"

She grinned. "See what I mean? Those turkeys who were running this place never thought of that. But there's nothing to it: spread out some flats on the dirt, put a few tapes in the machine and there you are. Saturday night special. Best thing in the world for morale."

"You are probably about the U.S. Army's best colonel for having fun," Dalehouse said.

"For all the rest of being a colonel, too, Danny. Don't you forget it."

"Well, I don't, Margie. I believe it. Only it's kind of hard to remember under the, ah, present circumstances."

"Well, I'll put my clothes back on if it'll help you concentrate. This isn't just fun and games. I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Whatever you want to tell me. How you think things are going. What isn't being done that ought to be? What you've learned being here that I haven't found out yet."

He propped himself up on an elbow to look at her. She returned his gaze serenely, scratching her bare abdomen just above the pubic hair. "Well," he said, "I guess you've seen all the reports about making contact with the sentients."

"Memorized them, Danny. I even saw some of the sentients at Detrick, but they weren't in very good condition. Espcially the Creepy."

"The burrower? We haven't had very good luck with them."

"Piss-poor, I'd say."

"Well—yes, that's fair. But we did get about ten specimens, two of them alive. And Morrissey had a whole report on them not transmitted yet. He says they're farmers—from underneath, which is kind of an interesting idea. They plant some kind of tubers in the roofs of their tunnels. He was planning to talk to that expert you were supposed to bring—I don't know her name."

"Sondra Leckler? She didn't come, Danny. I had her scratched."

"Why?"

"Political. She's Canadian." She looked at him thoughtfully. "Does that fact mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"No, I didn't think so. Canada voted for Peru's thousand-mile limit in the U.N. That's cozying with the Peeps right there. And everybody knows Canada's got the hots for the Greasies because of their goddam Athabasca tar sands. They're politically unreliable right now, Danny. There were four Canadians

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scheduled for this shipment, and I scratched all their asses right off.''

''That sounds pretty paranoid,'' he commented.

'No, realistic. I've got no time to teach you the facts of life, Danny. What else? I don't mean about the burrowers.''

He regarded her thoughtfully. She lay on her back, hands behind her head, comfortable in her nudity as she squinted toward the glowing red Kung. For a slightly plump girl her waist curved beautifully into her hips, and her breasts were rounded even while she lay on her back. But under that blonde hair was a brain Dalehouse did not fully understand.

He dropped back and said, ''Well, there's the balloonists. I know the most about them. Our regular flock is off toward the Heat Pole, but there's another one out over the water. They're basically territorial, but—''

''You were at the Greasy camp a while ago, weren't you?''

''Yeah. When we were still on visiting terms. Is that what you want me to tell you about?''

''Among other things.''

''All right. They've got a hell of a lot of stuff we don't, Margie.'' He described the machine that molded building blocks, the plasma generator, the farm, the air-conditioning, the *ice*.

''Sounds pretty nice,'' she commented. ''We'll have all that stuff too, Danny, I promise you. Did you see a plane and four gliders?''

''No. There was an airstrip—Cappy commented on it; it didn't make sense, with just a helicopter. But they didn't have a plane then.''

''They do now. I thought they'd sneaked a reinforcement in that you didn't catch. Did you know about the base on Farside?''

''*Farside*? You mean the dark half of Jem? What the hell would anyone want there?''

''That's what I need to find out. But they've got it. Why do you think I stayed four extra orbits before I came down? I made damn sure I photo-mapped and radar-surveyed everything I could; I know every satellite around Jem, I know every spot on the surface that's using energy, and I don't like all of what I know. The Farside base was a real shock. Did you see any children in the Fat camp?''

''Children? Hell, no! Why would—''

''Well, I think they're moving whole families in, Danny, which seems to indicate they've got more than an exploring expedition in mind.''

''How could you tell whether they had children from space?''

''No way, Danny. I didn't say the orbital reconnaissance was the *only* way I knew what was going on with the Fats. One other thing. No, two. Have they got a baseball field?''

''Baseball?'' He was sitting up now, staring at her. ''What the hell would they do with a baseball field? Cricket, maybe, and no doubt football, but—''

''That's a break,'' she said, without explaining. ''Last question. Did you happen to run into a fellow named Tamil?''

''I don't think so.'' Dalehouse thought hard. ''Wait a minute. Short fellow with a shaved head? Chess player?''

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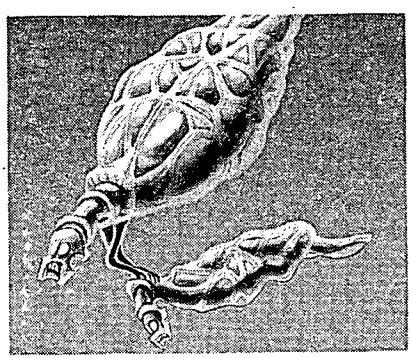
"I don't know. He's an Indonesian."

"Well, I'm not sure, but I think there was a petrochemist with a name like that. I didn't talk to him. I don't think he spoke English."

"Pity." Margie ruminated for a moment, then sat up, shading her eyes. "Are those your balloonists out there?"

As Dalehouse turned to look, Margie was standing, taking a few steps toward the shore, and what he looked at was not the sky but her. The artist Hogarth had said that the most beautiful line in nature was the curve of a woman's back, and Margie, silhouetted against the ruddy sky, was a fine figure of a woman. Half-amused, Dalehouse realized by the stirrings in his groin that he was beginning to display interest. But only beginning. The stimulus was that beautiful and remembered butt; the suppressant was the things she said. He would be some little while figuring out just how it was he did feel about Margie Menninger.

Then he got his eyes past her, and forgot the stirrings. "There are ha'aye'i out there!" he said furiously.



"What'ys?"

"They're predators. That's not our regular flock; they just drifted in, because of the lights, most likely. And those clouds are full of ha'aye'i!" The flock was close enough to be heard now, singing loudly, only a few hundred meters away. And far beyond and above them three slimmer shapes were stooping toward them.

"That's a what-you-call it, there? Jesus! Look at that mother," she cried, as the first of the air-sharks expertly ripped at the bag of the huge female, slipped past, turned end-for-end and reversed itself. It came back ten meters lower to catch the deflated balloonist as it fell, braying its death-song. "That's a fucking *Immelmann* that thing just did! Nobody's done that since World World One!"

"This isn't a performance, damn it! They're dying!" Two more of the predators had struck and two more balloonists were caught, farther down the shore. But at least it was not Charley's flock. None of those victims were friends. "See that stuff coming out of the female?" he asked. "Those are her eggs. They're long spider-silk kind of things. They'll float around forever, but they won't be fertilized because none of the males have—"

"Fuck her eggs, little buddy, I'm rooting for the shark! What a killing machine! Shit, Danny, I can see why things are going badly here. You people picked the wrong allies. We ought to team up with the sharks!"

Dalehouse was scandalized. "They're animals! They're not even intelligent!"

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"Show me a professor," she said, "and I'll show you a fart-brain. How intelligent do you have to be to fight?"

"Christ. The balloonists are our friends. We've got them doing surveillance for us. The ha'aye'i would never do that. Now you want us to line up with their natural enemies?"

"Well, I can see there might be problems." She stared wistfully at the ha'aye'i, which had ripped away the inedible bag and was now feasting on the soft parts of its still living prey. "Too bad," she said philosophically. She stepped back toward Danny, still watching the spectacle, and took his hand. "You're really sure about this? There's no way to persuade our gooks to get along with the sharks?"

"No way at all! Even if you could somehow reach the ha'aye'i to explain what you wanted. The ha'aye'i don't even sing. That's the whole meaning of life to balloonists. They could never deal with creatures that didn't sing."

"Oh?" Margie looked at him thoughtfully. Then she released his hand and sat down again, leaning back on her arms and looking up at him. "Tell me, Danny, would you like to make me sing?"

He stared at her. Why, she was sexually excited by watching the slaughter!

He glanced at the top of the bluff, where the back of the head of the orderly was motionless in sight. "Maybe we'd better be getting back," he said.

"What's the matter, sweetie? Don't like having an audience? Tinka won't bother us."

"I don't care about her."

"Then what?" she asked cheerfully. "Hey, I bet I can guess. You're hassled about the colonel."

"Tree? He's got nothing to do with me."

"Aw, come off it, sweets." She patted the ground beside her. After a moment, he sat down, not very close. "You think I've been getting it on with old Nguyen the Tryin'."

"No. I don't think it, I know it."

"And suppose I have?"

"Your business," he said promptly. "I'm not saying it isn't. Maybe I've got some sexist-pig notions, but—"

"But no maybe. You fucking well do, Danny boy." She was smiling without softness now.

He shrugged. "Let's go back, Colonel."

"Let's stay here. And," she said, "I've got the rank on you, and when a colonel says 'let's to a captain, what it means is *do it*."

There was no more stirring in Dalehouse's groin; he was both angry and amused at his own anger. He said, "Let's get this straight. Are you ordering me to fuck you?"

"No. Not at the moment, dear boy." She grinned. "I hardly ever order officers to fuck me. Only enlisted men, and very seldom them because it's bad for discipline."

"Are you saying the colonel ordered you to fuck him?"

"Danny dear," she said patiently, "first he couldn't—I've got the rank—second, he wouldn't have had to. I'd fuck Guy any time. For any reason. Because he's technically my superior officer and I don't want to rub in the fact that I'm the one who's commanding. Because

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it'd make things go smoother on the mission. Because it's interesting to get it on with somebody half my size. I'd fuck a Krinpit if it would help the war effort, only I don't know how we'd bring up the kids. But," she said, "a girl's entitled to a certain amount of non-goal-oriented recreation, too, and, Danny, I have really the fondest memories of you from last year in Bulgaria."

Fully relaxed, she rummaged under her for her clothes and pulled out another joint.

Dalehouse watched her lighting it. Her body was tanned over every inch; no bikini marks, and looking a lot better than the fishbelly white that came after a while on Jem. She scratched between the crease that hid her navel and her pale pubic hair, exhaled peacefully and passed him the joint. The thing was, Dalehouse conceded to himself, that he had really the fondest memories of her last year in Bulgaria, too, and it did not seem to matter that he had also some bad memories. "You know the thing that gets me about you?" he asked. "You make me laugh about a hundred different ways. Lean over this way, will you?"

When they had used each other up, they rested for a moment. Then Margie jumped up and dashed into the water again. Dalehouse followed; they splashed and roared; and as they came out he was astonished to discover that suddenly he didn't feel quite used up any more. But Margie was calling up the bluff: "Tinka! Time hack!"

"Thirteen twenty hours, ma'am!"

Margie slipped into her fatigues quickly, and leaned over to kiss Dalehouse as he was standing with one leg in his pants. "Time to get back. I've got a busy afternoon before the dance and, Danny, I'd appreciate it if you'd do something for me."

"What's that?"

"Teach Tinka how to do that balloon thing this afternoon."

"Why?"

"I want her to run an errand for me. It's important."

He considered. "I can get her started, anyway. But I don't know if she can learn it all in a few hours."

"She learns fast, I promise. Come on—I'll race you back!"

They ran the hundred meters. Marge got off first, but by the time the outpost was in sight Dalehouse had caught up with her. As he passed she reached out and took his hand and pulled him back to a walk. "Thanks for the exercise," she panted.

"Which exercise, swimming, running, or fucking?"

"All of them, dear Danny." She breathed hard and then, just before they got within earshot of the perimeter guards, she halted him. "One thing I ought to mention to you," she said.

"What's that?"

"I just want to set the record straight. With Nguyen Tree I'm fucking. With you I was making love."

★

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Twelve on perimeter guard, two in sickbay, three in the comm shack and eight others on the other twenty-four-hour details that always had to be manned; that left over a hundred and twenty people in the Food camp and nearly every one of them was at the dance. Marge congratulated herself as she flung through a hora. It was a big success. When the dance ended and the rhythm changed to something Latin, she shook off the three men who came toward her. "I've got to sit this one out and catch my breath," she said. "After the next number I make my little speech. Then you're all on."

She retreated behind the little stand and sat crosslegged on the ground, breathing deeply. Marge Menninger's parents had endowed her with good genes and she had taken care of her equipment; after a long day and a solid hour's dancing she was not tired and her wits were still about her. And the day had been not only long but good. She had got the camp over their scare about the loss of the three people by treating it as if it didn't matter. She had brought them all together in the dance. She had started the groundwork for Tinka's little mission, organized an effective perimeter guard, broken the back of the job of unloading and stowing cargo and begun six other tasks equally important. And she had got it on with Dan Dalehouse, on terms of her own making but obviously acceptable to him. That was a personal matter, but not unimportant. Marge was careful to keep an eye on long-range prospects. And as a possible permanent future pair, if permanent pairing turned out to be the way things were going to go on Jem, Dalehouse was the best bet she had yet identified.

It was Marge Menninger's conviction, recent but certain, that this job was what she had been born for. The important thing was to do it the right way, which was her own way, which had to be laid out from day one. No false starts. A happy camp—plenty of work to keep them busy, and plenty of time to enjoy themselves. And a productive camp. Jem belonged to her and hers and now they had it.

While she was waiting for the cha-cha to end, she considered the next day. Ship One would be empty, and a team could be started on separating the two halves and moving them into position in the perimeter. Dalehouse or Kappelyushnikov—which? The Russian, she decided—Kappelyushnikov could be briefed on Tinka's mission, or at least enough of it so that he could escort her part way to the Greasy camp. A work team could be organized to start putting up poles for the farm plot. She would meet, and learn to know, at least six of the advance party; in two weeks, she should know everything she had to know about everyone in the camp. Orders would be cut naming Guy Tree as her G-1 and Santangelo as G-2; the others she would wait on, since there might be people she hadn't met yet who should have the jobs. And, if things went well, during the three hours she allowed herself for a mid-day break, she would go for a walk in the woods. And finally, she would make a first approximation of

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a requisition list for the next shipment from Earth. That couldn't wait. With all the fuss the civilians were kicking up, Marge Menninger wasn't sure how many more shipments there would be. She already knew a number of goodies she wanted, but the old-timers would probably think of more. So she would need to talk to some of the old-timers. Morrissey, Krivitin, Kappelyushnikov—she would fill in the others later.

The smell of pot from beyond the stand pleased her. She thought of lighting up before getting up to make her speech—it was another way of showing her personal style. But it had been less than half an hour since the last one, and Marge knew her tolerances exactly; it might make her fuzzy.

The cha-cha ended and the girl at the tape machine, looking toward Margie, switched it off. Marge nodded and climbed the stand.

The laughter and buzz dwindled as the hundred-odd people turned to face her. She smiled out at them for a moment, waiting for silence. They looked exactly like the plebes at West Point had looked, exactly like the audience in the Senate hearing room, like every audience she had ever faced. Marge was in touch with her audiences; she could always make them like her, and for that reason she liked them. She said, "Welcome to the first weekly Food Bloc Expedition Saturday Night Dance. I'm Colonel Marjorie Menninger, U.S.A., and I'm your camp commander. Some of us already know each other pretty well by now. The rest of us are going to get to know each other very well, very soon, because when you come right down to it we don't have much choice, do we? I'm not worried about that, and I hope you're not. We're a pretty select bunch." She allowed her gaze to drift past the audience to the edge of the lighted area, where two of her grunts were holding another while he vomited, and added, "—Although you might not know that at first." A small laugh, but genuine. "So let's start getting to know each other. Guy? Saint? Where are you?" She introduced Tree and Santangelo as they stood forth. "Now Vince Cudahy—are you there? Vince is a mathematician, but he's also our chaplain. He used to teach at Fordham, but he's agreed to be non-denominational for the purposes of this mission. So if any of you want to get married, Vince is authorized to do it." Small chuckle. "He's a little old-fashioned, so he'd prefer it if you're of different sexes." Somewhat larger laugh, but a little questioning note in it. "And in case you do," she went on, "or even if you don't, you ought to meet Chiche Arkashvili. Cheech? There she is, our medical officer. Try not to get sick over the next twenty-four hours, because she's still setting up. But then she'll be ready for business, and back home in Ordjonikidze her specialty was obstetrics." No laugh at all this time. She hadn't expected one. She gave them a moment to draw the logical conclusion, and then pressed it home. "As you can see, we're planning a permanent base, and I'm planning to make this the best duty any of you have ever had, so that a lot of you will want

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to re-up and stay here. And if you do—and if any of you take seriously what I've just been talking about and decide to settle down and have a family on Jem, I'm offering a special prize. A thousand petrobucks for the first baby born in our camp—provided you name it Marjorie, after me." She waited a beat and added, "Two thousand if it's a boy." She got the laugh she wanted, and closed it out: "Now, on with the dance." And as the music started she jumped off the platform, grabbed the first man in reach and started them all going.

★

For the next half hour, Marge Menninger played hostess, at which she was very, very good. She danced with the men who didn't much dance, kept the music going, made sure the drinks kept coming. What she wanted was for everybody to have a good time. The next day would be time enough for them to start thinking about permanent colonies, and how much choice they would be likely to have about extending their stay. When chance permitted, she got a word in with the people who had known what she was going to say, asking how they thought it had gone. It seemed to have gone well. It made her feel good, and she found she was really enjoying the party. She drank with the drinkers, smoked with the dopers and danced with everyone. It was safe enough, now. When the time came to shut the dance down Tinka would let her know, and meanwhile Tinka would keep an eye on her colonel.

Coming back from the brand-new latrine, Marge paused to enjoy the sight of her people having fun. It was going to be all right! They really were a good bunch, hand-selected, fit, well-trained. Whatever she had said to anyone else, in a secret, inside part of her heart Marge had felt a small but unsettling fear that her first really independent command might take qualities she hadn't known she needed. So far, not. So far, everything was going precisely as she had planned, according to the priorities she had laid out in her own mind: Priority 1, safeguard the integrity of the unit. And it was safeguarded; she could see the perimeter guards in regular patrol, a little disgruntled at missing the dance but carrying out their orders meticulously. Priority 2, accomplish the mission assigned. And that was well on the way. Priority 3, subject to accomplishing 1 and 2, make it a busy and happy camp. And that looked good, too.

She walked around the outskirts of the dance, nodding and smiling, not yet quite ready to get back on the floor. Tinka appeared beside her, one hand on her government-issue pouch, looking questioningly at her. Marge shook her head. She didn't need another joint just then. She was feeling happy and relaxed, but just the littlest bit light-headed. Part of it was the smarmy heat and the peculiar instability that weighing only about three-quarters of what she had been used to for ten years gave her. But she was feeling a little edgy, too, and checking dates in her mind she thought she knew

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why. When she came near the medical officer she said in her ear, "Got your freezers going for the sperm and ovum bank yet, Doc? Because I think I'm going to make a donation."

"Noon tomorrow we'll be ready," Chiche Arkashvili promised. "But the way the boys and girls have been disappearing into the bushes, I don't know if we'll need it."

"Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. If I could, I'd—"

She stopped. "What would you do, Colonel?"

"Forget it. Don't let me keep you from urgent business," said Marge amiably, and watched the doctor go on toward the latrine. If she could, she'd get a whole stock of frozen sperm and ova from Earth, because the bigger the gene pool you started with the better the chances you'd have a healthy, stable population in another two or three generations. But she was not quite ready to put that request on her next letter to Santa Claus. She would have quite enough trouble with the items she was already determined to requisition, and from Christ's own number of light-years away her powers of argument were limited.

A few meters away the Bulgarian girl was in some sort of altercation with Stud Sweggert, the sergeant Marge had put onto the first of her ships. Normally she wouldn't have interfered, but there was something she wanted from Dimitrova. "Tinka," she said softly over her shoulder.

"Yes'm."

"Stay with." Marge went up to the arguing couple, who stopped as she came close. "Sorry to break this up," she said.

Dimitrova glared at her. Feisty little prunt; it crossed Marge's mind that her first impulses about Ana Dimitrova might have been best, but it was not a useful thought any more. She discarded it.

"There is nothing to break up, Colonel," the girl said. "The sergeant wished to show me something I did not want to see."

"I bet he did, honey," Marge smiled. "Will you excuse us a second, Sergeant?" And, when he was out of earshot, she asked, "How is your Indonesian, Dimitrova?"

"Indonesian? It is not one of my four-oh languages, but I believe I could translate a document satisfactorily."

"I don't want a document translated. I want to know how to say, 'Good morning. Where is the baseball park?' "

"What?"

"Shit, lady! Just tell us how to say it."

Ana hesitated, then, with some disdain, said, "*Selamat pagi, dimana lapangan baseball?*"

"Um." Marge rehearsed it to herself for a moment, glancing at Tinka. The orderly shrugged. "Well, write it down for me. Now, how do you say, 'Have you a map?' "

"*Saudara punja peta*?"

"Got that?" asked Marge, looking at the orderly. "Not sure? All right, Dimitrova, take Tinka to my office and write it out for her. Make sure she gets it right." For a moment she thought the Bulgarian

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might object, but then she nodded and the two of them started away.

Sergeant Sweggert was still standing there, three meters away, watching her with calm interest. Margie laughed. "What are you doing, Sergeant, waiting to ask me for a dance? Or do you want to show me that little thing you were so anxious to drag out for Dimitrova?"

"Hell, Colonel. You've got me all wrong."

"I bet I do. Sweggert," she said good-naturedly, "you're not a bad guy, but it's against my policy to, ah, fraternize with enlisted men. Except in an emergency, of course. And what you've got to show has been widely seen already, I guarantee you."

"Ah, no, Colonel! It was educational. They got a tame gasbag here, and it's real interesting."

"Yeah?" She looked at him more closely, and from the way he stood, the way his head sank into his shoulders, she realized that the man was pretty full of something. But he was also R.A. and, whether they chose to call the present time night or day, as a practical matter, Kung made it pretty close to broad daylight. "I'll take a look," she decided. She followed him behind the cooktent, and there was one of the balloonists, clinging to a rope and singing softly and mournfully to itself. It was much bigger than the female she had seen at Camp Detrick, but obviously in some sort of trouble.

"What's it saying?" she demanded.

The sergeant said with a straight face, "I really don't know, ma'am. You want to hold him a minute? Just pull down on the rope."

Margie looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, but he was right, it was interesting. She pulled on the rope. "Damn thing's strong," she complained. "Hey, Sweggert! What are you doing?"

He had leaned down and pulled something out from under a tarpaulin. "Just a strobe light, ma'am."

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"Well," he said cunningly, "I haven't never seen it, but the guys say if you give one of these things a flash it's real interesting."

She looked from him to the sad, wrinkled face of the balloonist and back. "Sergeant," she said grimly, "it damn better be or I'll have your ass on toast. Flash your fucking strobe."

"Is that an order, ma'am?"

"Flash it!" she snarled. "Or—"

And then he did.

XV

After four days of trying Ana was finally granted permission to use the radio for a call to the People's camp. When the communications clerk signaled *GO* she leaned forward and spoke in Urdu into the mircrophone. "This is Ana Dimitrova calling, from the camp of the Food-Exporting Bloc. I wish to speak to Ahmed Dulla, please."

The comm-clerk switched off the microphone and said, "Now you wait. It usually takes about ten minutes for a return message."

"Message? Can I not speak directly to Dr. Dulla?"

"Not with the Peeps, honey. We

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transmit a message, they transmit an answer. If they feel like it."

"How very queer. Well, thank you, I will wait outside." As she left she added, "Please call me when the answer comes."

"Count on it, sweets."

What a nuisance, she thought crossly, sitting cross-legged in the warm electric-heater glow from Kung overhead. Still—ten minutes! She had waited much longer than ten minutes to hear Ahmed's voice. And at least his plight could no longer be as serious as she had feared at first. The word was out in camp that the People's Republics, through what superhuman exertions one could hardly imagine, had succeeded in reestablishing communication with their outpost on Jem. A ship had landed. A small one, to be sure, but at least they were no longer helplessly dependent on the other colonies for the means to survive. How that must have angered Dulla!

Around her the camp was very busy. Nearly a hectare had been cleared and seeded on the slopes above, and the stanchions were in place for the lights that would make the seeds grow. Power would be next, and that was already being attended to. The Food bloc at last had its own solar-power plant in process of assembly, and meanwhile there was a nuclear-fueled steam plant already in operation—small, expensive, but reliable.

Ana was the best of the three translators in the camp and, since the disappearance of Harriet Santori, the only one who seemed capable of picking up the fine structure of an only partly understood language. Her Krinpit was quite imperfect, and there seemed little chance to practice it. For the burrowers she had spent much time with this James Morrissey, who seemed to have taken them as his personal reason for existence, but none of it had come to much. The microphones he insinuated so gently into the tunnels sometimes picked up a scrap or two of squealing, chittering, half-muffled sounds, but evidently the burrowers detected them at once and avoided them. When they didn't steal them. More than once, Morrissey had pulled out a probe and found the working head neatly disconnected.

But with the balloonist she had become almost fluent. She had worked closely with Professor Dalehouse—so far only by radio; the intriguing but frightening prospect of soaring with him under a cluster of bags of hydrogen was for some indeterminate time in the future. Then the Russian pilot, Kappelyushnikov, had taken off with Colonel Menninger's orderly and a cluster of hydrogen tanks on some foolish, secretive errand, and she had been ordered off the radio until further notice. Instead she was assigned to clerical work in the tiny hospital, where there was in fact no clerical work to speak of, since it had as yet no real patients.

But. Regardless. No matter what small frustrations and annoyances, was she not on Jem, only a matter of a few score kilometers at most from Ahmed? Not to mention the dizzying excitement of being on Jem at all. Another planet! Circling another star! So far from home that not even the sun itself could be

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found in the ruddy Jemman sky! She had not yet dared to go out into the jungle (though others had, and returned safe and excited at the strangenesses they had seen). She had not yet even swum in that great lake, or sea, so temptingly near; she had not thought to bring a bathing suit, had not yet found time to make one, and certainly would not follow the custom of those others who frolicked in nothing at all along the beach. Just now she could see a batch of them splashing and shouting. They were supposed to be working on the hydroplanes which were being assembled at the water's edge, but their thoughts, she would warrant, were far less on transportation than on the animal joy of the beach.

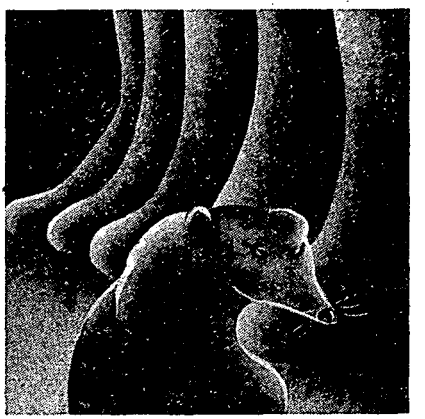
Not, she thought justly, that that in itself was wrong; why should they not? It was not Ana's concern if other persons had different moral standards than her own, so long as they did not try to inflict them on her. And splashing would in fact be great fun in this muggy heat—

"Dimitrova!" She jumped up and ran inside the tent for her answer, but it was only:

"Ahmed Dulla is not available at present. The message will be given to him."

In English. And English with a very bad accent, at that; whatever Heir-of-Mao had sent, it was not good translators. She thanked the comm-clerk, concealing her disappointment, and strolled toward the perimeter. Off duty, not enough time to eat, too early to sleep; what should she do since she could not do the thing she wanted most?

Really, it was too disappointing!



Where could he be?

She was annoyed to discover that she was beginning another headache. How infuriating! For some reason she had not had very many in her first days on Jem—perhaps because everything was so intensely exciting that she had no time to think of headaches. She did not want one now. Ana was an industrious person by nature, and it occured to her that idleness was not likely to prevent the headache but only to make it worse. What to do? If she only had a proper costume, how agreeable it would be to help the boat-builders on the beach. Or to climb the slope and assist in planting—but no, at the moment they were only plowing, and she did not know how to run to tractor. The power plant. She knew nothing of it, of course, but she had sturdy limbs and a willingness to use her muscles, why not?

Unfortunatley, as she approached she discovered that one of the noncoms working on the project was Sgt. Sweggert.

She changed course and walked

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briskly away.

She had avoided Sweggert since that night she had come back with the colonel's orderly and found the two of them in rut, out in the open, for all to see! Of course, no others had seen. Nan turned away at once, sweating with embarrassment, and there had been no one else, or all the camp would have been talking of it. Tinka would not speak, Sweggert would have been talking of it. Tinka would not speak, Sweggert would perhaps not dare to, and the colonel—Well, Ana did not have the delusion that she understood the colonel. But Colonel Marge Menninger she had not been able to avoid, and the woman had said nothing of the incident, had in fact showed no signs that it had ever taken place. That bleached American, copulating with a man whose name she perhaps did not even know! No, that was unfair; they knew each other. But certainly not socially. Oh, yes, to be sure, she would blame it on the aphrodisiac effect of the—the mist, she put it to herself, that the wounded balloonist emitted. One had heard all about that by now. Still, how appallingly lewd! Not to say—what was the word?—"tacky."

Ana found herself at a guard post in the perimeter fence, and at once it became clear what she wished to do. "I am going for a walk," she told the corporal in charge, who shrugged and watched impassively as Ana squeezed between the strands of the barbed wire.

In a few steps she was out of sight of the camp.

If she could not see Ahmed, at least she could see Jem. She pushed through the violet-oily growth, here all flickering with blue-green lights, and paused to listen. Tiny skittering sounds from the underbrush, the rustle of the plants in the wind. There was no wild life here that would harm her, she had been assured. Because of the presence of the camp, there were not many animals at all. Some had been frightened away, some poisoned; where the garbage details had brought a day's collection of slops into the woods and buried them you could see the ferns withered, the crab-grass ground cover dry. Terrestrial biochemistry was as hostile to Jemmans as the other way around, but the Jemmans had not had a Camp Detrick to make them salves and injections against the rot.

But what was left, how fascinating and how strange! Forests of plants like ferns, but fruiting and with woody stems. Succulents, almost like bamboo; the hollow stems would make good structural materials, and Ana's thrifty soul instructed her to tell the colonel not to waste precious iron on tent stakes any more. Vines like grapes, with hard seeds, no doubt meant to be spread in the excrement of small animals. (If any survived in this part of the forest.) And the mangrove-like giants called "many-trees," a dozen or more trunks linking together at the crown, that made a canopy under which she moved.

She stopped and looked around. There was no question of getting lost, she reassured herself, as long as she kept the red-glinting water in sight on her left. At any time she

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could simply climb down to it and return along the beach.

And there was no question of being tired here, either, when one climbed so lightly over fallen logs and rocks. It was an excellent time for taking a nature stroll, she thought, squirming between the trunks of a many-tree that glittered blue-green in firefly beads, if only her head did not hurt so.

In front of her was a lump of fungus, gray-pink and without lights of its own. It looked quite like a brain, she thought. In fact, rather like her own. Since the brain-splitting had been done under local anesthesia she had seen every step, some in the mirror overhead, some in the closed-circuit likris screen. That was how her brain had seemed to her, quite remote and unfeeling. Even when the sharp hooked blade had halved it in one smooth motion it had been hard to connect that sight with the insistent dragging pressure that was all she felt.... Later, when they were reconnecting some of the necessary nerves, she suddenly felt the reality of it. She would have been ill except for the surgeon's motherly scorn. "A great strong girl like you!" she had laughed. "No. Nonsense! You will not vomit." And Nan had not....

What was that noise?

It sounded like distant sticks rattling against hollow logs, and someone moaning. It was the sort of sound she had heard before, on tapes at Camp Detrick. The crustaceans, yes! But perhaps not the social race. Perhaps those wild and surely dangerous ones that had been only rumored—

The human voice that came from behind her was severe. "Is it sensible for you to be alone here, Ana?"

In Urdu! With that stern compassion she had heard so often! She knew before she turned that it was Ahmed.

★

An hour later, a kilometer away, she lay in his arms, unwilling to move lest she wake him. The Krinpit's sound was always audible, sometimes near, sometimes moving farther away; she smiled to herself as she thought that the creature had surely been near while they were making love. No matter. It was not a matter for shame, what she would proclaim anywhere. It was not at all like that American bleached blonde, because—well, of course, because it was with Ahmed.

He twitched, snorted and woke up. "Ah, Ana! Then I did not dream this!"

"No, Ahmed." She hesitated, and then said in a softer voice, "But I have had that dream many times.... No! Not so quickly again, please, dear Ahmed—or, yes, whenever you like; but first let me look at you." She shook her head and scolded, "You are so thin! Have you been ill?"

The black-bead eyes were opaque. "Ill? Yes, sometimes. Also sometimes starving."

"Starving! How terrible! But—"

"But why starve? That is simple to answer. Because your people shot down our transports."

"But that is quite impossible!"

"It is not impossible," he con-

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tradicted, "because it happened. Food for many days, scientific instruments, two ships—and thirty-four human beings, Ana."

"It must have been an accident."

"You are naive." He got up angrily, pulling his clothes together. "I do not blame you, Ana. But those crimes are a fact, and I must blame someone." He disappeared behind a many-tree, and after a moment she could hear the splashing of his urine against the bole.

And also another sound: the Krinpit's rattle and moan, growing close again. If only she had had more time with the tapes at Detrick! But even so, she could distinguish a pattern that was repeated over and over. *Sssharrn–* And then two quick notes: *eye-gone*.

She called weakly, "Ahmed?"

And heard his laugh. "Ah, Ana, does my friend frighten you? He will not harm us. We are not good for him to eat."

"I did not know you had such friends."

"Well, perhaps I have not. No. We are not friends. But as I am the enemy of his enemies, we are allies at least. Come along, Sharn-igon," he said, like a householder strolling a puppy, and came back into view.

Scuttling lopsidedly behind him was a great nightmare creature, rattling and moaning. Ana had never been so close to an adult, live Krinpit, had never quite realized their size and the loudness of their sounds. It did not have a crab's claws. It had jointed limbs that waved above it, two that tapered to curved points like a cat's claw, two that ended in fist-like masses of shell.

It paused, seeming to regard Nan, although as far as she could tell it had no eyes. And among the sounds she recognized words in Urdu! Syllable by syllable, it scratched and grumbled out a sentence:

"Is this one to die?"

"No, no!" said Ahmed quickly. "She is—" He hesitated, then emitted sounds in the Krinpit language. Perhaps it was his accent, but Ana could not understand a word. "I have told him you are my he-wife," he explained.

"He-wife?"

"They have a very rich sexual life," he said.

"Please, Ahmed. I am not ready for a joking little chat. The Krinpit said 'to die,' and what does it mean?"

"Naive Ana," he said again, looking at her thoughtfully. Then he shrugged. He did not reply, but he unwrapped a flat ruddy-brown leaf from an object he had been carrying. It was a flat metal blade, broader at the end, the edge razor-sharp. The hilt was sized to fit a man's hand, and the whole thing half a meter long.

"Ahmed! Is that a sword?"

"A machete. But, you are right, it is a sword also now."

"Ahmed," she said, her heart pounding harder than the throbbing in her head, "some days ago three persons from the Food camp were killed. I have thought it was an accident, but now I am not sure. Shall I ask you if you know anything of this?"

"Ask what you like, woman."

"Tell me!"

He thrust the machete into the loamy ground. "All right, if you

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will have it so, I will tell you. No. I did not kill those Fats. But yes, I know of their death, I do not mourn them, I hope many more will die. And if it is necessary for me to kill a few I shall not shrink from it!"

"But— but— but Ahmed," she babbled, "dear, gentle Ahmed, this is murder! Worse than murder, it is an act of war! Suppose the Food bloc retaliates? Suppose our homelands do not accept this as a mere struggle far away, but themselves retaliate on each other? Suppose—"

"Have done with your supposing!" he shouted. "What can they do to retaliate? Bomb Pakistan? Let them! Let them destroy Hyderabad and Multan, let them bomb Karachi, let them wipe out all the cities and burn the whole coast. You have been there, Ana, how much of Pakistan can be destroyed? What bombs can blast through mountains? The people will survive. The leeches that flock to the cities to beg, the government parasites—yes, the intellectuals, the proud bloodsuckers like you and me—what do I care if they all die? The people in the valleys will live!"

She was silent, frightened, searching for words that might sway him and finding none. "Ah," he said in disgust, "what is the sense of this? But do not be angry with me."

"Angry? That is not what I feel," she said miserably.

"Then what? Hatred? Fear? Ana, what are we to do?Let them starve us? We have one small ship to save us, and what have the Fats and the Greasies? Navies! And if the fighting spreads—" He hesitated, and then burst out: "Let it! Let all the rich ones kill each other, what do we care? Remember, six out of ten human beings on Earth are ours! If there is war on Earth—if only a million survive, then six hundred thousand of them will be citizens of the People's Republics. And here—"

She shook her head, almost weeping. "And here? Sixty per cent too?"

"No. More. On Son of Kung, if anyone survives—one hundred per cent ours."

XVI

The rains were all around, squall clouds driving past them, up toward the Heat Pole, where the rain that dropped from them fell a kilometer or two and evaporated, never striking the hot, salt ground. The flock was spread out over a kilometer of sky, grumbling in dissonant chords. "Have patience," Charlie scolded them. "We must stay, must stay."

They echoed, "Must stay," but it was poorly sung. No matter. Charlie had promised his two-legged friend that they would stay, waiting to observe certain strange and incomprehensible events, and the flock would do as he vowed.

Still, it was uncomfortable, like an itch or a sunburn to a human being, to have the swarm in such disarray. The place he had promised to watch was upwind of the Camp of the Big Sun. It did not do to come too close to that. Many of his flock, and more of other flocks, had been punctured or burned by the far-striking missiles of that camp; so he had to keep the flock from drifting toward it, seeking every counter-flowing gust, and still

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avoid the squalls as much as possible. Dalehouse had told him that it would be difficult. But he had also said it was important.

Charlie rotated his eye-patches over the horizon. No sign of the aircraft he had been told to expect. But he did see a vagrant drift of thistledown and spinner-silk moving across the hills below. A cross-current! He sang his flock together and vented gas.

They followed, dropping to a level where the wind took them away from the rain, to a likely area of updraft. They followed well, everything considered. Expertly he guided them under the base of a fair-weather cumulus, and they rose with the drift.

The song of the swarm became contented. It was at the top of these pillars of rising air that the best feeding was found: pollen and butterfly-seed capsules, the small, soft creatures that filled the same ecological niche that insects did on Earth, dried salt particles from the wavelets of landlocked seas, even tinier things. A flock at feed was queer looking, every fin and frill extended to trap whatever touched it. It was also at risk, or once would have been. It was a favorite time for the ha'aye'i to knife in, slashing every bag they passed, and tearing the life out of victims before the helpless gaze of flockmates. Helpless no more! Charlie sang a boastful song of his great friend, Danny, who had given them the far-striking weapons that drove the ha'aye'i a hundred clouds away. Or sometimes did. Now each male and some of the females had the weapons in his own flock, and the ha'aye'i had come to recognize Charlie's swarm and avoid it.

Although, in truth, it was no longer as tempting to predators as it once had been. So few left! Once there had been hundreds, now fewer than a score.

There was still no aircraft on the horizon, nothing on the mesa upwind of the Camp of the Big Sun. Charlie relaxed, fed with his swarm, and as he ate, became more mellow. He led the flock in gentle songs of childhood and joy.

There was a time when Charlie had been a tiny pip-sized pod, pumping mightily to bulge the creases out of his little gasbag, still tied to the ragged end of his sailing-ribbon and to the winds that bore it where they liked. Gusts blew. Air-to-air lightning spat all around him. Because he had no real control over his altitude, he was sometimes tossed up through the tops of towering convection clouds, the dull red sun hot on his tiny balloon, actual stars shining through the murky sky; sometimes so low that he brushed hills and fern-trees, and shelled or furred creatures clutched after him as he spun by. Eighty out of a hundred of his brood-mates died then, in some way or another. Ten more died soon as their drift-ribbons fell away, tasty hors-d'oeuvres for the ha'aye'i, or even for the protein-hungry adults of another chance-met flock. Or even their own. Only a few out of each hundred survived to reproduce. And then there were still the ha'aye'i. And the storms. And the clutching beasts from below.

But still–to be a balloonist! To soar and to sing! Above all, to share the chorused flock-lore that united them all, from the tiniest pod to the leaky old, slow giants that even the ha'aye'i scorned. Charlie's song was triumphant, and all the flock around him

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stopped their greedy gobbling to join in the harmony.

Still his eye–patches rotated watchfully toward the mesa; but there was no sign of the airplane or of the New Friend he had been told would rise from the spot. And they were drifting with the cloud, away from the Camp of the Big Sun.

Many of the flock were sated, softly singing their private courtesy–songs of thanksgiving. They were a fine flock though, Charlie admitted, very few in number.

He sang to them, "Stop feeding, stop feeding! We must go!"

"Go where, go where?" grumbled a chorus of the slower and the hungrier ones, and an individual song sounded above the choir:

Faintly: "I must eat more. I die." That was the old female, Blue–Rose Glow. Her bag had been seared when half the flock had been set aflame.

"Not now, not now," sang Charlie commandingly. "Follow!" And he sang the new song, the duty song he had learned from his friend Danny Dalehouse. It was no longer enough to float and sing and replenish hydrogen and breed. Not any more. Station must be kept and the mesa observed. And the Camp of the Big Sun must be avoided, and the ha'aye'i guarded against and the swarm kept together; so many imperatives, both the new and the old! And so he led them through their slow, bobbing dance with the winds.

For a long time he led them, watching ceaselessly as he had promised. Even so, it was not he who first saw the thing. From far behind, old Blue–Rose Glow sang feebly, "There is a new Sky–Danger."

"Catch up, catch up!" he commanded. "You sing poorly." It was not sung in unkindness but only because it was true.

"I leak," she apologized. "Nevertheless it is there, almost in reach of the Earth–Dangers, far away."

He rotated his eye–patches and rose to another air–current. There it was. "I see the Sky–Danger," he sang, and the rest of the flock confirmed. It was not ha'aye'i. It was the mechanical thing from the camp of the Middle Sun, as he had been told. In it, he knew, was the Other Friend who had sometimes soared with Danny Dalehouse, and also the New Friend he had not yet seen.

It was all as said by Danny Dalehouse. The biplane slunk in at treetop level and set down on the dry mesa, a dozen kilometers upwind of the Greasy camp. While the swarm watched, Kappelyushnikov and a female person emerged and began to fill a net of balloons out of tiny tanks.

When the New Friend's cluster began to swell and she rose gently from the ground, the aircraft took off again, turned quickly and slipped back down the slope toward the distant ocean–lake. The New Friend rose into the prevailing poleward wind and drifted directly toward the Camp of the Big Sun.

Charlie dared come no closer, but he saw her venting gas as she approached the camp. She tumbled into the underbrush somewhere nearby; and it was all as it had been foretold.

"The thing is done," Charlie caroled triumphantly.

"And what now?" asked the swarm, milling around him, staring after the New Friend as she fell.

"I will ask the air," he sang. His little insect–legs fumbled at the switch

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of the hard, shiny speaker–to–the–air Danny Dalehouse had given him. He sang a questioning greeting to his friend.

He tried twice, listening between times as Dalehouse had taught them. There was no answer, only an unpleasant hissing song of static and distant storms.

"We must go near the Camp of the Middle Sun," he announced. "The speaker–to–the–air cannot sing so far." His skilled eyes read the signs of the clouds and the fern–tops far below, seeking the currents he wanted. It was too bad that Dalehouse could so seldom soar with the flock these days, because of the hated ha'aye'i of his own kind, but Charlie knew that once they were in line of sight, the speaker–to–the–air would bring his song.

"Follow!" he sang. He swarmed the flock around him. They dropped, all fourteen of them, through a fast-moving layer of stratus cloud, into the backflow near the surface.

When they emerged, old Blue–Rose Glow was gone, the leaks in her bag finally too great to allow her to remain airborne. So was the young female called Shrill-Squeal, nowhere in sight, even her song no longer audible.

By the time they approached the Camp of the Middle Sun and Charlie began to sing through the radio to Dalehouse, there were only twelve left in the flock.

★

Marge Menninger looked up as Kappelyushnikov came in from the orderly room, closing the flap to her private office behind him. "Any word?" she asked.

"Danny has had radio from gasbag, yes. Your friend was seen to descend near Greasies, all in order."

"How long ago?"

"With gasbags, who can say? Perhaps some hours. Not long after I departed spy–drop scene."

"All right. Thanks." After he left, Marge started to call the communications tent, then decided against it. If the Greasies radioed that they had rescued Tinka, blown helplessly off course, the communications clerk would let her know. And he hadn't. So the Greasies were playing it covert and slick, and what was Tinka up against in their camp? Had they figured out that she really wasn't there by accident? Could she–? Were they–? Wasn't it–? Questions multiplied themselves in Margie's mind endlessly, and there was no straightforward way of getting answers. You could get your ass lost in those swamps of contingencies and subjectives.

That was not the way Marge Menninger ran her life. She made a decision. In one hour exactly she would have the comm clerk radio a query to the Greasies, and until then she would put it out of her mind.

Meanwhile, lunch was fifty minutes away and what to use that time for?

The fifteen notes she had made to herself on this morning's calendar had all been checked off. All current projects were on schedule, or close enough. Everyone had been assigned tasks. The first hectare of wheat was in the ground, sixteen different strains competing to see which would thrive best. The perimeter defenses were in order. Three turrets still sat on the

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beach, ready to be put where needed when she wanted to expand the perimeter, or establish another post. She looked at the 1:1000 map, two meters long and a meter high, that covered almost all of one wall of her office. That was something! It showed every feature within a kilometer of where she sat–seven creeks or rivers, a dozen hills, two capes, several bays. Grid references were not enough, they needed names. What better way to name them than to let individual members of the camp pick them? She would organize a drawing; each winner could name something, and that would give them something to do. She called in her temporary orderly and dictated a short memo for the bulletin board. "Check it with the communications section," she finished. "Make sure we list all the features worth naming."

"Yes'm. Colonel? Sergeant Sweggert wants to see you. Says it's not urgent."

Margie wrote *Sweggert* on her calendar. "I'll let you know." Then she put Sweggert out of her mind, too. She had not yet decided what to do about Sweggert. She had a wide variety of options, from laughing it off to court-martialing him for rape. Which she elected would depend a lot on how Sweggert conducted himself. So far he had had the smarts to keep a low profile.

On the other hand, she thought, her authority to court-martial anybody for anything rested on the military chain of command, which extended up from her through the tachtran link to higher authority on Earth. And who was to say how long Earth would give a shit about backing her up? Or about whether the colony lived or died? The news from home was bad, so bad that she had not passed all of it on to the camp. The tachtran message acknowledging her shopping list had advised that it was touch and go whether she would get everything she had asked for. Requests for further supplies after that shipment were, quote, to be evaluated in terms of conditions at the time of receipt of requisition, unquote.

It was what she had expected. But it was sobering.

On her pad for the afternoon she made two notes:

Medic.–bank okay?

Food–6 mos. estimate firm? Stretch 1 yr w rationing?

It was a damn nuisance that the agronomists all seemed to be Canadian! Margie needed some smart and private help–smart, because how they managed their crops was likely to be life and death for the colony, sensitive because she didn't want the colony to know that just yet. If she got everything on her shopping list, she would have plenty of seed stock. But who knew whether she had the ones that would grow best?

–Dismiss that thought, too.

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Forty minutes left.

She unlocked the private drawer of her desk and lit a joint. Assume the shopping list all gets delivered. There's enough on it for pretty fair margin against most kinds of disasters, she thought, and there was no sense worrying until she had to.

The requisition list included a good chunk of personal things for Margie herself: clothes, cosmetics, microfiche sewing patterns. With the patterns, there would be enough variety in styles to suit everyone in the camp, male or female, for a good long time, assuming they found some way of producing fabrics to make the patterns on. It would be nice to have some pretty clothes. She was already beginning to feel the absence of Sakowitz and Marks and Sparks, Sears and Two Guys. One day, maybe, she thought, drawing a deep hit. Not Sakowitz, no. But maybe a few boutiques. Maybe some of the people in the camp had sewing or tailoring skills, and maybe it was about time she started locating them. She flipped the calendar ahead a few pages and made a note on a virgin page. That Bulgarian prunt was the kind of girly–girl who would like to sew, possibly even as well as Margie did herself; she had been pretty morose after her long walk in the countryside, but she did her work and might need something to occupy her mind. It didn't seem that she wanted a man for that purpose, at least she had thoroughly discouraged Guy Tree and Cappy and Sweggert–

Sweggert.

"Jack, send the sergeant in," she called.

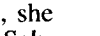
"Yes'm. He's gone back to the perimeter, but I'll get him."

As she leaned back, marshalling her thoughts about Sweggert, the handset buzzed and it was the communications clerk. "Colonel? I was just talking to the Greasies about Corporal Pellatinka."

"I didn't tell you to ask them."

"No'm. But I kept sending on her frequency, like you ordered, and their radioman cut in to ask if we had lost her. So I said she didn't answer. So they said they'd send out a party to look for her."

Margie sat back and took a thoughtful drag on the cigarette. According to the balloonists, there was no way the Greasies couldn't have seen her come down. So now they were overtly lying.



Sergeant Sweggert shared a number of traits with Marge Menninger. One of them was that he was willing to go to a lot of trouble to get things right, and then if he saw a chance for improvement, he was willing to do whatever it took to make them righter. When he perceived that moving the Number Three machine–gun emplacement two meters toward the lake would improve the field of fire, he moved it. Or his squad did. The fact that it took five hours of backbreaking work did not affect his decision. He lent a hand to put the HMG on its tripod and swung it to check the field. "Fucking lousy," he told the crew, "but we'll leave it for now. Get that ammo restowed."

He crouched behind the gun, swiveling it through full traverse. It was an act that gave him pleasure. As far as the shore of the lake on the extreme left and the beginning of the fern for-

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est on the right, there was no way than any sizeable creature could approach without being a clear target for the gunner. The claymores and smoke bombs were emplaced and fused, and his command–post detonating radio was keyed to each of them. The floodlights were in position, with quadruple redundancy. At any given moment only a quarter of them were lit, searching the entire area around the perimeter. Every hour that quarter went off, and the next quarter came on, so that any burned–out bulbs or wiring deficiencies would distribute themselves equally and could be fixed in the down time. In actual combat, of course, they would all be on. Most would be shot out, but not in time to let anyone cross that perimeter. Not alive.

Although, he admitted to himself as he climbed out of the dome, the chances that anyone would try a straightforward frontal attack were very small. Maybe an attack from the sky. Maybe by long–range rocket fire. Maybe not at all. This whole fucking shootup was crazy, if you asked Sergeant Sweggert. What the fuck was there to fight about in this asshole place, without a bar or a town or even for God's sake a decent tree or field? If you had asked him, that was what he would have said, in total sincerity, but it would not have stopped him from fighting for it.

The balloonists were still hanging around. Sweggert neither looked at them directly nor changed expression; it was none of the squad's business what he was thinking. But inside he was swearing. The colonel wouldn't have kept him waiting like this a week ago. If she was going to shaft him, what was she waiting for? . . . "Sarge." He looked up. "They're calling you from the orderly room." He turned idly, and saw the corporal waving.

"Aggie, take over," he ordered. "If I come back and that ammo isn't restowed, it's all your asses."

He strolled back toward the HQ tent and walked in. Marge Menninger was eating out of a messkit, reading from a small-screen viewer. She didn't look up. "The perimeter's looking good, Sweggert," she said. "Got that machine–gun back in place?"

"Yes'm. Colonel? There's a bunch of gasbags around, and that one we been using is about used up. We'll be relieved in a couple of minutes. Can we get a fix from the new ones?"

She put down her spoon and looked at him. After a moment, she said, "Just who do you mean by 'we,' soldier?"

"Oh, no, ma'am!" Jesus, she was touchy! He knew he was close to trouble. "I don't mean nothing, ma'am, just that the detail's been working hard and they need a little break. We'll–they'll come out of it in an hour, and the relief'll be there anyway."

She studied him for a moment. "That's four–oh, Sweggert, but only half the detail. Keep the rest sober."

"Sure thing, Colonel. Thank you, Colonel." He got out of there as fast as he could. Shit, he should've been more careful, knowing how she felt and all. Not that she was all wrong. If he hadn't been drunk, he wouldn't have done it. But, shit! It was worth it. Remembering the way she had been, with a skin full of the balloonist mist, his groin grew heavy.

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When he got back to the detail, he looked at them with some disapproval. Corporal Kirstianides was skinny and had sideburns all down her cheeks, but she was the best he had to pick from. "Aggie, take Peterson and four others, you're on duty till the relief shows up. Kris, you and the rest come along with me. We're gonna take ourselves a jizzum break. Anybody don't want to come, switch with somebody don't want to stay. Let's move it."

The balloonists were out over the ocean–lake now, half a kilometer away and low. Sweggert marched his dozen troops across the camp to the empty tents at the end of the company street; he would do it in the open if he had to, but damned if he wouldn't take a little privacy when he could get it. The tethered balloonist, farther than ever from recuperating, had been moved there days since, along with the strobe light.

Sweggert stopped, swearing. Nan Dimitrova and Dalehouse were talking to the balloonist, and only a few meters away the Russian pilot, Kappelyushnikov, was complaining about something to Colonel Tree. Privacy, *shit*. But it didn't matter; he had Colonel Menninger's permission, and she was the one who counted. He retrieved the strobe and pointed it toward the hovering swarm.

Predictably, Dalehouse butted in. "What do you think you're doing, Sweggert?"

Sweggert took time to aim the strobe and flash it to bring them in before he answered. "Gonna have a little fun. The colonel said it was okay."

"Hell she did! Anyway–"

"Anyway," Sweggert interrupted, "why don't you go check with her if you don't believe me? Would you move a little, sir? You're getting between them and the light."

Ana Dimitrova laid her hand on Dalehouse's arm to keep him from replying. "It is not fun for the balloonists, Sergeant Sweggert. To experience sexual climax is very painful and debilitating. As you can see, this one is seriously affected. It may die."

"What a way to go, hey, Ana?" Sweggert grinned. "Take it up with the colonel–hey, Dalehouse! What are you doing?"

Dalehouse had switched on his radio and was singing softly into it. Colonel Tree, beginning to pay attention, walked toward them, and Sweggert turned to him. "Colonel! We have Colonel Menninger's permission to get the loonies in for a fix, and this guy's telling them to screw off!"

Tree stopped, with his hands clasped behind his back, and nodded gravely. "A dilemma," he said in his soft, child's voice. "It will be quite interesting to see what they do."

What they were doing was spreading themselves all over the sky, some dropping lower to catch the onshore breeze, others hesitating. They were singing loudly and discordantly, and the sounds came distantly from the sky and tinnily from the radio in Dalehouse's hand. Sweggert stood rock–still, controlling the rage that was building up in him. Fucking Cong! When you had the CO's permission, that was all you were supposed to need! Why wouldn't Tree back him up! "Gimme that," he growled, reaching out for Dalehouse's radio.

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But Dalehouse's expression had changed. "Hold it," he snapped, and sang a quick phrase into the radio. The answer came back as a cascade of musical phrases; Dalehouse looked startled and Ana Dimitrova gasped, her hand to her lips. "Tree," he said, "according to Charlie, there's some Krinpit down the beach, and they're eating a couple of people."

"But Krinpit do not eat human beings," objected Colonel Tree, and Sweggért chimed in:

"There's nobody down there. Nobody's gone through the perimeter all day."

Dalehouse repeated his question into the radio and shrugged. "That's what he says. He could be wrong about the eating part, I guess–he doesn't have a very clear concept of killing, except to eat."

Sweggert put down the strobe. "We better tell the colonel," he said.

Colonel Tree said, "That's correct. You do so, Dalehouse. Sergeant, form your squad on the beach in thirty seconds, full combat gear. We're going to see what's happening."

★

Half an hour later Marge Menninger herself, with thirty armed grunts behind her, met the first party coming back along the beach. There were no casualties, or at least none from the Food Bloc, but they were carrying two people. One was in a sort of sling made from two jackets knotted together, the other on Sergeant Sweggert's shoulder, fireman–carry. They were both dead. When Sweggert put his burden down, it was obvious why he had been easy to carry. Both legs were missing, and so was part of his head.

The other body was less mutilated, so that Marge Menninger recognized her at once.

It was Tinka.

Marge stood numbly while Sweggert made his report. No Krinpit in sight; they had got away, so far that they couldn't even be heard. Both people were dead when they got there, but recently; the bodies were still warm. For that matter, they were still warm now. And the man had had a packet in a waterproof wrapping inside his shirt. Margie accepted it and tore it open. Microfiches–scores of them. The man's ID card, which showed that he was the Indonesian Tinka had gone to contact. A pair of child-sized spectacles–clear glass, not optically ground; why? For that matter, how? Had they been caught as spies, and then somehow escaped? And how had they got the long distance from the Greasy camp to the beach where they died?

By the time they got back to the base, she had an answer to at least part of the question, because Dalehouse reported the balloonists had spotted something that looked like the remains of a deflated rubber boat, farther down the beach. She swung the tiny glasses from their elastic band as she listened, nodding, taking in all of it as information to process, not quite ready to take in the information of Tinka's death as a pain to feel.

She looked down at the glasses. They were now almost opaqué.

"That's interesting," she said, in a voice that was very nearly normal. "They must be photo–sensitive glass. Like indoor–outdoor sunglasses."

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She glanced up at the sullen red coal of Kung overhead. "Only what in the world would anybody want with them on Jem?"

XVII

Six kilometers down the shoreline from where he had slain the Poison Ghosts, Sharn–igon paused in his flight to scratch out a shallow pit under a bluff. He needed to hide, because he needed to rest.

Digging was always dangerous for a Krinpit because of the Ghosts Below. But here it was unlikely they would be near. Too close to the water; they did not like to risk their tunnels flooding. And the Many–Tree on the bluff above him was a good sign. The roots of the Many–Tree were distasteful to them.

As he settled himself in, Sharn–igon wondered briefly what had become of his co–belligerent, the Poison Ghost Dulla. He did not feel concern, as one might for a fellow being. He did not think of Dulla in that way. Dulla was a weapon, a tool, without "being"ness. After they had slain the Poison Ghosts Dulla called "Greasies" they had both fled, and of course Dulla had fled faster and farther. Sharn–igon did not think of that as a betrayal. If he had been the nimble one and Dulla the slow–moving, he would certainly have done the same. Dulla's utility as a tool lay in his speed, and in the way he was able to speak words to other Poison Ghosts that caused them to hesitate, to be uncertain, while Sharn–igon had time to come in upon them and kill. It was so very easy to kill Poison Ghosts! A few slashes, a blow with the club–claw, it took no more than that. Sometimes they had weapons, and Sharn–igon had learned to respect some of those weapons. But the two on the beach had had so little, a bright–sounding popgun whose little bullets bounced off his shell, a thing that squirted some sort of foul, stinging smell at him that made him feel queer and unpleasant for a moment, but did not slow him in the kill. Such as they he could kill with or without his tool, the Poison Ghost Dulla.

He switched his carapace back and forth to wedge himself deeper in his pit and rested, his hearing receptors watchful toward the water, his feelers drilled deep into the soil to listen for vibrations from any approaching Ghosts Below. It was they he feared, more than any danger from the water or the beach.

Of course, in normal circumstances an adult Krinpit in shell was a match for a dozen of the Ghosts Below–as long as he could stay on the surface. Or at least in sound of it. In the open, Ghosts Below seemed deaf, running almost at random. But these were not normal circumstances. Sharn–igon was not only weary, he felt sick. He felt irritable, tense, bloated–ready, he would have said to his he–wife (but Cheee–pruit was months dead, his carapace dry), to stridulate and jump out of his shell. But it was not the right time for that. He was not due for many months yet, so it couldn't be normal pre–moult tension.

Abruptly his sphincter loosened. He regurgitated everything he had eaten in a great flood, meat of deafworm, scraps of chitin of crabrat, half–digested fruits and fungi and leaves.

Vomiting left him weak but calm.

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After resting for a moment, he covered the mess over, and then methodically began to clean his shell. No doubt the Poison Ghosts were taking revenge for being killed on the beach. It had to be their scraps of flesh still caught in Sharn–igon's chelae that were making him ill. That–and the inner sickness that had claimed him when the Poison Ghosts first came to his city, and began the remorseless chain of circumstance that had taken all joy from his life.

Krinpit did not cry. They had no tear–ducts; they had no eyes to have tear–ducts in. They did have the emotion of sorrow, and no culture–driven tabus against expressing it in their own way. That way was stillness. A quiet Krinpit–or as close to quiet as a Krinpit could get–was a weeping Krinpit.

For most of an hour, once he had polished the last dried particle of alien blood off his tympanum, Sharn–igon was nearly soundless: a rasp of claw against carapace, an occasional despairing moan, little else.

Unbidden, sounds of happier times echoed in his mind. He heard Cheee–pruitt again, and the little female–what was her name?–whom they had impregnated, and who bore their young. She had been a dulcet creature. She had had almost a personality of her own, along with the bittersweet appeal of any mated female, her young growing and eating inside her until too much was destroyed and she died. The brood polished her carapace clean and emerged to the loud, exciting world of their wife–father's back.

But everything was changed now.

It was all the fault of the Poison Ghosts! Ever since the first of them had arrived and Cheee–pruitt, dear, lost Cheee–pruitt, had had the unwisdom to try to eat it, Sharn–igon's world had fallen apart. Not just Cheee–pruitt, all of it. The Krinpit he had mobilized against the Poison Ghosts Dulla called Greasies had been punished severely. His own village–mates had been attacked from the air in reprisal, and so many of them dead. And how many had he succeeded in killing in return? A few. Hardly any. The two on the beach, the handful that he and Dulla had surprised at the outpost–not enough! And all of Dulla's plans had come to little: the nearest Krinpit village to the Fats had wavered and wobbled, promised to join in an attack and withdrawn the promise; and meanwhile all he and Dulla could do was skulk around like crabrats, looking for strays to attack and finding none. Until the two came out of their sinking vessel–

There was a sound from the water.

Sharn–igon froze. It was not possible for him to be wholly silent while he breathed at all, but he did his best. He listened out of his shallow cave, and heard a small, almost inaudible blurred echo from the water. A coracle. And in it what seemed to be a Poison Ghost.

Another to kill? It was approaching. Sharn–igon thrust himself out of the cave and reared up to defend himself; and then he heard his own name shouted across the beach: "Sharn–igon!" And then those barbarous sounds that were the name of his mistrusted ally, or his truced foe: "OCK–med dul–LAH."

He scuttled across the sand, half to greet Dulla, half ready to kill, as Dulla yelled and pleaded, "Hurry!

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The Fats will be searching this whole coast, we must get out!"

★

With Sharn–igon aboard, the coracle rode very low in the water. It could not easily sink. Its cellular shell entrapped too much air for that. But it could swamp.

Crossing Broad Water it often did, and then both of them splashed and bailed and kept a watchful eye or ear for Ghosts Above until they could get under weigh again. The little sail helped them when the wind blew fair; but there was no keel. When the wind shifted, the sail had to come down and they had to paddle. It seemed to take forever; and Sharn–igon felt increasingly ill; and at every stroke or splash the grim recriminations continued:

"But for you, my he–wife would still be alive."

"You are foolish, Sharn–igon. He tried to kill us, it is not our fault he died of it."

"And my village was attacked, and another village destroyed entirely, and I myself am ill."

"Speak of something else, Sharn–igon. Speak of the promises your Krinpit made to join in the attack on the Fats, and how they broke them."

"I will speak of my sorrow and my anger, Ahmed Dulla."

"Then speak also of mine! We too have suffered in fighting with you against the common enemy."

"Suffered."

"Yes, suffered! Before my radio was destroyed–by you, Sharn–igon, by your clumsiness!–I could hear no voice from my camp. They may be dead, all of them!"

"How many, Ahmed Dulla?"

"A dozen or more!"

"A dozen or more of you have then died. Of us, how many? Of persons, two hundred. Of females, forty. Of backlings and infants–"

But it was not until they had crossed Broad Water and Sharn–igon heard the silence from his city that he perceived the immensity of the tragedy. There was no originated sound! There were only echoes, and what echoes!

Always before, in crossing Broad Water, the city had presented a bustling, beautiful sound. Not this time. He heard nothing. Nothing! No drone of immature males at the waterfront, shredding the fish catch. No songs from the mold–eaters on the Great White Way. No hammering of stakes to build new palisades on the made land on the point. He heard the echo of his own sounds faintly returning to him, and recognized the shadowy outline of the mooring rocks, a few sheds, one or two boats, some structures half destroyed, a litter of empty carapaces. Nothing else.

The city was dead.

The Poison Ghost, Dulla, chattered worriedly to him, and Sharn–igon made out the words: "Another attack! The place is empty. The Greasies must have come back to finish the job."

He could not reply. Stillness overcame him, a great, mourning silence so deep that even the Poison Ghost turned toward him in wonder. "Are you ill? What is happening?"

With great effort Sharn–igon scratched the words out on his tympanum. "You have killed my city and all my back–mates."

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"We? Certainly not! It could not have been the People's Republics, we have not the strength any more. It must have been the Greasies."

"Against whom you vowed to protect us!" roared Sharn–igon. He rose on hind legs to tower over Dulla, and the Poison Ghost cringed in fear. But Sharn–igon did not attack. He threw himself forward, out of the coracle, with a broad *splat* that sent the waves dancing. The water was shallow here. Sharn–igon managed to keep some of his hind feet on the oozy bottom, while enough of his breathing pores were above the surface to keep him from drowning. He charged up the shoreline, scattering the littered water in a V of foam.

The tragedy made him still again, at every step and at each fresh echo. Dead! All dead. The streets empty, except for abandoned carapaces, already dry. The shops untended. The homes deserted. Not a living male, not a female, not even any scrambling, chittering young.

Dulla waded through the stink of dead and floating marine animals, towing the coracle and staring about it. "What a horror!" he exclaimed. "We are brothers now more than ever, Sharn–igon."

"All of my brothers are dead."

"What? Well, yes. But we must be as brothers, to take revenge! We must be allied against the Greasies and the Fats."

Sharn–igon reared up, trapping him against the wall of a ruined shed. "I now need new allies, Ahmed Dulla," he ground out, falling upon him. In the last moment Dulla saw what was to happen and tried to escape. But it was too late; his quickness was not enough when he dodged from the snatching claws only to take the full force of the murderous club of chitin that stove his head in.

When he was quite sure Dulla was dead, Sharn–igon staggered away, blundering through the dried shells that had once been friends, to rest creakily against the wall of a shop he had once known.

He took little satisfaction in the death of one more Poison Ghost. He did not even any longer mourn for the death of his city. A nearer pain touched him. His joints were aching, his body felt bloated, his carapace seemed to be sundering at the seams. It was not his time. But there was no doubt about it. Alone in the open tomb that had once been his home, with no one to care for him while he was helpless, he was beginning to moult.

XVIII

Oh one–thirty hours. Major Santangelo, along with the pilot–engineer who had brought in the third ship. "Some good news, Margie. There's a coal outcropping in the Bad Hills, two kilometers up. Plus we can burn wood and biomass, and Richy here says we can make a steam boiler with plates from one of the landing craft. If your turbine arrives, that means we can drive the generator up to full capacity, fifty kilowatts, without using up our fuel reserves."

"When?"

Santangelo looked at the engineer. "Ten days? Call it two weeks."

"Call it one week," Margie snapped. "What about alcohol?"

"Well, Morrissey's got a kind of a yeast–something like a yeast –anyway, he's getting fermentation.

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Should be putting the first batch through the solar still tomorrow. You can probably smell it."

"Saint, I can *taste* it. I need that alcohol to stretch out the airplane fuel!"

"I'll goose him along," Santangelo promised.

"Do it," said Margie. When they were gone, she picked up the handset and called the radio shack. "Any ETA yet?"

"No, ma'am. They're still in orbit, figuring a minimum–energy descent." She hung up. At least the resupply ship was in orbit around Jem, not light–years away. But that last little step was a killer. The captain had radioed that his maneuvering reserve was low and he was waiting for the most favorable approach. That might be days! Worse than that. If the Cape had launched them without plenty of reserve, that meant things were seriously wrong at the Cape. Even wronger than the coded tachtrans from Earth had indicated, and that was wrong enough.

She looked at her watch. Oh one forty–five. "Send in Dr. Arkashvili," she called, and the medic came in on cue, bearing a cup of steaming black coffee.

"Medical supplies, Margie. But a little more sleep would do you more good."

Marge sniffed the aluminum cup rapturously and took a scalding sip. "I wish they'd land," she said fretfully. Among the goodies on her shopping list were coffee beans, or seeds, or whatever it took to try to grow coffee for themselves. Otherwise the next couple of years, anyway, might be coffee–free. Of course, the Greasies probably had some growing already, to make that vile stuff they handed out in the little brass pots, but they weren't likely to give any away. They weren't giving anything away now, not even information over the radio; and the Peeps simply were not answering at all.

At least the camp was gratifyingly healthy, according to the medic's report. The anti–allergens were standing up well, and there was nothing else in the Jemman environment to make a human being sick. A few headaches, probably from the climate and from the switch to a 24-hour day; some dentistry; an appendix that needed watching; a request for a vasectomy– "No," said Margie sharply. "Don't do any vasectomies. Or laparoscopies, either."

The doctor looked thoughtful. "You're going to have some knocked–up personnel."

"You're supposed to be able to handle that, right? Anyway, give them the pill, diaphragms, condoms–anything reversible or temporary. I get along fine with an IUD, and I can always take it out if I want to have a baby."

"Which you might?"

"Which all of us females may damn well have to, Cheech. That's an order: Everybody capable of breeding *stays* capable. How's the baby bank?"

"Coming along fine. I've got twenty-eight ova in cryonic hold, and about a hundred sperm samples."

"Good, Cheech, but not good enough. I want a hundred per cent compliance with that. If anything happens to anybody, I don't want his genes lost. Or hers. They don't take up much space, do they? Then I want, let's say, four samples from each,

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and–what are you grinning about?''

The medic said, ''Well, it's just that a couple of the ova turned out to be pre–fertilized. They're fine. They'll keep in the deep–freeze indefinitely, but whenever you want them re–implanted, we won't have to go to the bother of getting them started.''

''Hum.'' Margie scratched thoughtfully. ''I'm almost sorry you took the sample; we could start having kids any time now. Who were they? Come on, Cheech, none of this medical confidentiality; I'm your commanding officer.''

''Well, one was Ana Dimitrova.''

''No shit! Whose kid?''

''You can ask her if you want to. I didn't.''

Marge shook her head wonderingly. ''I would have guessed her about last,'' she said. ''And the other one? Now, wait a minute! It couldn't be me! The IUD–''

''The IUD doesn't keep an ovum from getting fertilized, it only prevents it taking root and developing.''

Margie sat back and stared at the doctor. ''I'll be damned,'' she said.

★

Nguyen Dao Tree was ten minutes late for his oh–two–hundred appointment, and arrived sleepy–eyed and irritable. ''This twenty-four-hour day of yours is not comfortable, Margie,'' he complained.

''You're not the one to bitch, Guy. I took the midnight–to–eight myself. If you'd spend your sleeping time sleeping instead of tomcatting around with every woman in the camp–''

''As to that, Marjorie,'' he said, ''I much preferred when you and I slept on the same schedule.''

''Yeah. Well. Maybe we'll have to do something about that, Guy, but right now we're late for inspection.'' She swallowed the last of her coffee, now cold but still delicious, and led the way. Complaints aside, the three–shift day was working well. On the plus side, the perimeter was well guarded, the hectarage under cultivation was growing by nearly two thousand square meters every day, the each–one–teach–one training schedule Santangelo had set up so that the skills of the community were shared among several persons (what if Chiche Arkashvili died? Or their one and only surviving agronomist?) was on track. On the minus, aerial surveillance showed large numbers of Krinpit roaming around the woods, coffee was not the only food item to be running low and the resupply ship still could not give a firm landing time.

Margie allowed one hour of each day for her inspection, and she used every minute of it. No white–glove chickenshit. The inspection was rough and dirty; if everybody was doing their job and the jobs were being done, that was it. Her Bastogne

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grandfather had not cared if the troops were shaved, only if they could fight. And Margie had learned the skills of a fortress under siege.

That was what they were. No one had attacked the perimeter, not even a wandering Krinpit. But they were isolated, in a world of enemies. From spy satellites and balloonists, from the breaking of codes and from what little could be gleaned from their infrequent radio contacts, above all from the contents of the Indonesian's pouch, Margie had formed a pretty good idea of what the Greasies were up to. Or had been up to, a few weeks earlier. They had occupied the Peeps' camp, they had requisitioned quantities and varieties of personnel and equipment that made her drool. Even her letter to Santa Claus (that might or might not be hanging in orbit, waiting to come down her chimney) had not been so greedy. They had subdued the local autochthones, apparently by killing off all the nearby Krinpit and shooting down any balloonist who came near. Their burrowers they seemed to have tamed. And were using them for minerals exploration, because it seemed the Greasies had perched themselves on a Kuwait of oil and a Scranton of other fossil fuels. They had devised an enzyme, or possibly it was a hormone–the information had been unclear–which took Krinpit out of action as well as 2,4–D had dried up the jungles of Vietnam, by causing them to moult. They had acquired something from their Creepies that let them make building materials out of dirt, as the burrowers themselves hardened the interior surfaces of their tunnels. They had– Christ, what had they not done! If only her father had listened to her and given her the support she demanded, how gladly and competently she could have done the same!

Not that she had done badly. But for Marge Menninger there was no such thing as second best, and the Greasies at that moment controlled the entire planet. Barring the dozen hectares her colony sat on, it was all theirs. Their aircraft roamed it at will, so the spy satellites said. They had three separate colonies now, counting the one that had once belonged to the probably no longer surviving Peeps. And apart from the rare occasions when she dared send Kappelyushnikov on a quick survey flight (what would she do if there were some unexplained "accident" to her one and only aircraft?), she was blind except for what the satellites and the few living balloonists could tell. She had even grounded Danny Dalehouse. Not only because of the risk to him–but that was a reason in itself, she admitted privately; she did not want him killed–but because the electricity that made his hydrogen was better used for floodlights, to protect the camp and make the crops grow. Also she had apprenticed him to the agronomist, along with Morrissey and the Bulgarian girl–wait a minute, she thought to herself; Dalehouse and Dimitrova? Maybe so. Probably not. They had been friendly, but not *that* friendly. But then who?

For that matter, she thought, looking at Guy Tree as he chattered away about contingency plans in the event of a major Krinpit attack, who was the father of her own sort–of child? Dalehouse? Tree? That son of a bitch Sweggert, with his cute little tricks? They were the most likely candidates,

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but which?

In other times, one part of Marge Menninger would have contemplated with sardonic amusement that other part of Marge Menninger which really, dammit!, wanted to *know*. At present she had no room for that sort of amusement in her mind. The thought of mentioning to Nguyen Tree that the two of them might be in the process of becoming somewhat delayed parents crossed her mind just long enough to dismiss it. It promised some good comedy, but it also promised complications she did not want to handle. First things first. "Are there any archers in the camp?" she asked.

Tree stopped in the middle of explaining his proposals for arming a couple of canoes. "What?"

"People who know how to shoot a bow and arrow, damn it. We must have some. I'd like to organize a contest, part of the sports program."

"Very likely so, Marjorie. I don't believe there are any bows and arrows, however."

"If they know how to shoot them, they know how to make them, don't they? Or anyway it'll be in the microfiches. Get started on that, please, Guy. We'll give prizes. Coffee, cigarettes. I'll donate a bottle of Scotch." The thought that had crossed her mind as he spoke of how he planned to mount a light machine-gun in a canoe was that the supplies of ammunition for the guns would not last forever either, but she wasn't ready to say that even to her second-in-command.

Tree looked puzzled, but paused to make a note in his book. "It would be a useful skill for hunting, I suppose."

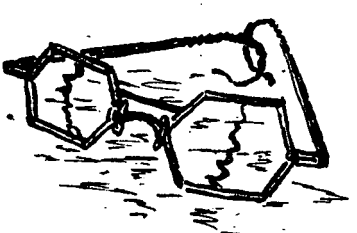
Margie nodded without replying. Hunting what? Every animal they had seen on the surface of the planet was well enough armored to laugh off any home-made bow-a conspicuous blunder on the part of evolution in this place, she was convinced. But she let it go.

As they were inspecting the power plant, a messenger from the communications shack trotted up. "Ship's on its way in, Colonel," she reported, panting. "They've already retrofired. We ought to see them in a couple of minutes."

"Thank God," said Margie. "Put it on the P.A. Guy, get twenty grunts for unloading. Tell Major Arkashvili to stand by in case they land rough."

They didn't land rough. But they didn't land right, either. The drogue chute deployed handsomely, the craft came swinging down on its cluster of three, they jettisoned on schedule and it came in on its rockets. But it never made it to the beach where the others had landed. It came in almost a kilometer short and dropped into the jungle and out of sight.

(To be Continued)



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A Little Girl's Spring Day in Moderan

by David Bunch

It was in-rain-time springtime that Little Sister danced across the planned-greening yards, one of her tiny hands lumped into a fist as though she concealed great treasure. She stopped outside his bubble dom's orange-screaming door that was marked with the flying FW in fresh-peas green, the alphabet's winged sixth and twenty-third letters designating "formula worker." "DADDY!" she shrieked in her "normal" voice that was often these days apt to be near-hysterical, "come see what came in the mail tube. TODAY! It's here! I sent a thousand dollars for it. TWO WEEKS AGO. I ordered out of an old Learner's Catalog! And now it says, "See Daddy or Mother. FOR HELP!" With the hand that was not a fist she waved; the waving contained a green sheet that had yellow and purple and pink and blue and red and orange writing on it in a kind of rainbow show, or in the Old Days it would have been so designated. Probably.

He moved like a man stung by a sudden pang in the head; he lurched and stared, still sitting in his formula worker's hip-snug, strapped in. And he peered carefully and long out through the tube of his Outer Scan to make sure the voice was really that of Little Sister and not some Enemy come disguised. After a good scanning while and after a goodly number of voice-a-grams had been analyzed and declared authentic, without-doubt Little Sister, he thumbed the switch that would alert Control a thousand miles away that he wanted loose from his chair bands. After a while of authenticating and negotiating over formula worker's long-com, Control gave the go-ahead and he came loose from the metal straps of that place where he sat at work.

Control windings unwinding, harsh restrainers metal-mumbling along the floor, free he lurched up at last. Tall and tottery he stood for a bit, a whit wild-headed and uncertain just for a while, for it had been more than a month now since he had been free of the bands. He shook his head to clear it and make peace with the strange height he was suddenly in and he

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called on all the reserves of his pride as a vaunted FW to keep him now from the dark disgrace of suddenly tumbling down. His thoughts sloshed furiously in the metal brain pans and went back a long way as he sought to rearrange and pattern into sense his unaccustomed feeling at the voice that had just said, "Daddy," and had also said, "See Daddy or Mother."

Was the chance worth it? Could he trust his analyses? Could he even trust the Outer Scan to accurately gather the impressions for the analyses? What if his eyes were just that nth part "on the blink" today for out–viewing, after all that close work in? But everything said yes, this really is Little Sister outside your door. And yes, he did want to believe them. But oh, the world is such a place of tricks now. What if it wasn't Little Sister, but a walking doll bomb come made–up, disguised, a calamity device designed to blow him at a handshake, at a hello, to high shrieks and all winds–and–skies and thus weaken Control by one Formula Worker less? Who would want to? Oh, anyone who was against Control would want to. And there are always those–OH YES!–those who would pick the Beautiful Precision to pieces and set the imprecision of choices loose in the world, in the name of Freedom. *Boooo brrrrrrkkkkkk blaaahhh boooo.* And he belonged to Control. He was Control! and Control was he! one and one and always one, bonded in inseparable union for greater for greater for greater for– It boggled; the metal brain pans died to a stop for an instant; he moved, not knowing why, on some older far–back Plan. He whistled the signal at his orange–screaming door; the door, never disobeying the signal, seemed eaten by the wall it slid into, and the proud flying FW was gone. He pressed his button for a voice.

"Hello hello HELLO, Little LITTLE Sis–Sister." Damn! after this long, talking was VERY hard. He stood as though frozen to the floor. He looked out and down at her from the exaggerated and very skinny height of his metaled feet and legs. Then he took five agonizingly slow and clanking steps toward his door. Exactly at the edge of his door he drew himself up. He planted himself in all his flying–FW dignity–drawn up and planted, yes! Next he did the "toeing of the line." Exactly to the edge, but no more. No Formula Worker, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances (called in the jargon of Control an E.O.C.) ever recrossed the edge of his door. Once in was IN. It was all too fraught with BIG CHANCE, BIG DANGER, such leaving, and besides, where would they go? Out to meet a girl FC (Formula Checker) in some mad rendezvous of clanking hot metaled sex and randy sloshing brain pans crying LOVE? Ah no. The State (Control) needed them too badly; only an E.O.C. could break them out past their door.

"A thousand–" he started to explode, some older far–back set of values nudging him, and then he thought, why, this *is* Little Sister, and this *is* spring. Forgetting for a little the iron urgency of his formula, he said, pressing the right button for "general small talk with close relative" on his voice box *phfluggee-phflaggee*, "What have you there, Little Sister, what have you got?"

She opened her fist–squeezed hand

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to reveal two ancient seeds that looked like pumpkin seeds, and she said, "Really now! Glad you asked. According to the Programs, I've got Nature's Packaged Life. As it used to be. And they showed a picture, like two big suns on the ground. And they claimed these two little teensy tiny things once could cause those two big giant things to come out and LIE IN A FIELD! If you followed instructions right. And tended everything right. In the Old Days. WITH DIRT. Oh my. Hmph! And water. And they said something about sun–sunlight. Do you think so? Whattya think, Daddy? Whattya think? WHAT'S DIRT?"

He cleared his throat and, deep out of gullet darkness, he spit up a tiny fleck of gold (his throat had been lined thus against cancer one year ago) and he moved his two metal feet just slightly at the "toeing of the line," but still toeing, ah yes. And he wanted so much to run back to the safe–and–known of his hip–snuggle chair, and prisoner bands and the cool calm programming into the formula, to help Control, to die–or–die for State.

But Little Sister was at him and he knew it might not be easy. Little Sister was just past five, oh sure, but what if she, forgetting all the training of the Programs, should revert to that true age and start up her machine-gun questioning: "Whattya think, Daddy? whattya think, Daddy? whattya think?" while she danced in great expectancy and demanded to be informed. Oh God. She might even start her patented fit–dance, where she shrieked and fell to the ground and kicked. He remembered.

Now, oh now, he needed her mother whole, instead of that female jig Mother had become, worked all in metal and plastic in all the replacable places, with the giant star–diamond rings on those fabulous removable fingers and the blue almost–all–replaced eyes staring, now always staring, like two very small fuzzy full moons out of a green settling fog while she had those long daily rubs, oh, every day! with the plastic man. "Why don't you just go to your mother?" he said. "It's more a little girl's place in the spring to question her mother." He warmed to the inspiration, to the idea of "getting out of it." "Just drop by Little Brother's place and both of you then run over to Mother's place and see what you can get started. See if she'll give you a little time from old Jon. Find out if her *phfluggee–phflaggee's* still working. Or is it all rubs now, with Mother?" He hated himself for this, this slicing underhanded attack on Mother and her plastic boy friend. He had no right to do this, really, he a proud Formula Worker for the State and surely above such shabby cheap caring and flesh–jealousy concern as to whether or not Mother, or even the most beautiful woman in the world, was rubbed.

"Going to Mother's a real bummer now–no good," Little Sister said. "And taking Little Brother with me is not the least bit of help in this world. They're both too far out, if you ask me. Mother's always on the bed for a rub and a bounce, and Little Brother's either blasting off in his little Universe–Scoot sports space rocket, or getting ready for launch. Just play, you know, but it takes up his time; hmmph! space probes are his whole entire life." She paused

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now and sized him with those hard-hard eyes she had, and he wondered how she would hit and where, knowing hit she would. –"Remember, Daddy, remember how BAD you helped me at Xmas? About my tree star? That fell?– When they let you out for one of those BIG EOC's. And you got mad and threatened to castrate Santa Claus. What's castrate?– Let's show now you CARE!"

He ignored everything but his own terrible aching dread now. He could not help it; he had to ask, and the words from his trembling *phfluggee–phflaggee* came on almost self–propelled and hit out like space probes: "Have you–did you ever–oh, could you tell me, Little Sister–about Mother and–?"

"Sure can. And it's not just rubs, and don't you ever think it!" Little Sister cocked her head and looked at her daddy in a very sly–josh way. I think this manner of looking would prompt just about anyone to wonder just how far this little missy's knowledge had traveled already along the road of the facts of life, packaged or otherwise. And he suddenly remembered that the Programs had probably told her all already about "how it used to be" in their supposedly VERY scientific approach to getting her ready for "how it was to be." But sometimes it all doesn't work as planned with little girls. Just as now, some "communication gone astray" in the Programs, probably, was what had prompted Little Sister to bootleg this order for pumpkin seed to that criminal seed house over the line in Olderan. Unaccountably now, he found himself wishing it were sunflower seed. He had once loved those big "suns," some the size of dinner plates, rioting in the hell–hot simmering fields of high summer across a great midwestern land.

He came back to NOW, with a terrible thud in his thoughts. Cold and cold it took him and cold and cold he asked from the hurts that are not to be described: "What What WHAT–does he do–DO–to her–besidesBesides–Besides–rubs?"

"He gouges her every once in awhile, sorta hard, with his little old short fat stick he's got on him that pops up every so often. SPRINGY! Sorta BIG!"

"Why Why WHY does he–DO–do–THAT?"

"How should I know!? Sometimes they get stuck together. Because she wants him to, I guess. And because she wants him to want to, I guess, and he certainly does, I guess, hee hee huk."

He looked at his little daughter laughing there. He wanted to run. He wanted to scream. He wanted to tear himself to pieces. He wanted to throttle her. He wanted to lash out at everything. He couldn't talk. His *phfluggee–phflaggee* refused to do its job. He pressed the button marked WAILS and finally he wailed.

"Oh Daddy, pipe down, shut that thing off–it's just fun, Mama–boyfriend fun. And whatever they're doing, it sure looks humpy–good to me. I stand there and laugh and laugh. I like to watch 'em, though, whenever I can, through this secret peep I've got. And when they get going good, I just jump around in sight and yell, 'Hi! Mama! Mama! hi! old Plastic Guy! you old pot.' And you should see how they scramble to sit back in shape and pose natural! You'd probably have to press your

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Ho–Ho button on that silly thing you've got there and die laughin'. But, according to the Programs, it's not supposed to be anything to hide and be ashamed of. Just good old hotsy–totsy fun between two consenters, as they say. REALLY wantin' it BAD! Huk huk hee."

The gold came on up in his aching throat–fleck after fleck after fleck now and fell to the floor, sounding like, in the Old Times, rain–pats as he gasped. He just looked at Little Sister, expanda–vision tuned to Horror–Gaze Gaze–on. He couldn't speak a sound. She seemed at a great distance. He waved to her with his hand that had all gone tin and his arm that was like a ton. She waved back. He screamed with his button screamer for a full fifteen seconds, for it seemed that might help some, some noise, some manifestation of outrage.

"I don't think it's what it oughta be at all," Little Sister said flatly, when the button screaming had subsided. "Too much of a racket. Since Mother's mostly tin and old Plasto–Jon's mostly plastic, they make an awful lot of commotion going after it the way they do–*jug–a–boom splat splat rattle rattle shake–a–shake rumple rumple ragh–a–ragh–a–ragh–a–ragh ohhhhhhh ummmmmmm.*" (Little Sister went jerky-jumpy and did little–girl bumps and grinds to illustrate her sounds.) "And they really breathe hard sometimes, both of them, with their breath bags pumping like CRAZEE! He takes off all Mother's clothes first, every stitch, just before they start–nylons and nasties tossed all over! Also his. They sorta undo each other. Otherwise they'd get too hot. Probably. Whattya think, Daddy? Whattya think, Daddy? Whattya think?

He fell forward. Or more, he just crumpled to a heap on his Formula Hut floor and became right before her eyes a very sad pile of quite expensive "replacement" metal and flesh–strip in a swoon. "Daddy's sick!" she said, mumbling worriedly to herself and the whirring emptiness around her. "I wonder why Daddy's sick? I wonder what I should do? Oh well–"

She eyed him with a little girl's real love for her daddy for a couple of seconds or so and she decided that he would probably eventually be O.K. on his own, or, if not, the State could just melt him up and start over as she had seen it done in the Programs. So why was she standing around, and who cared how it turned out anyway? He sure as heck wasn't any help to her right now, and never had been, really. Neither had Mother. And Little Brother–*brrrkkk booooooo*–bad news all the way. So she took off, running as hard as she could across the planned–greening yards, all up with the metal grass now after Seasons finally had set the wheels right to put old winter on the skids and under on the giant yard–sheet Control rolls, all over Moderan.

But she still didn't know how in the world she was going to find some dirt, and sneak it, to grow those "punkins." She did know, though, one thing: Daddy had certainly been as useless as usual in helping her solve a problem.

–David Bunch

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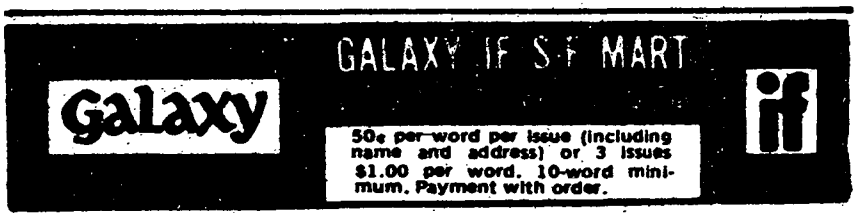
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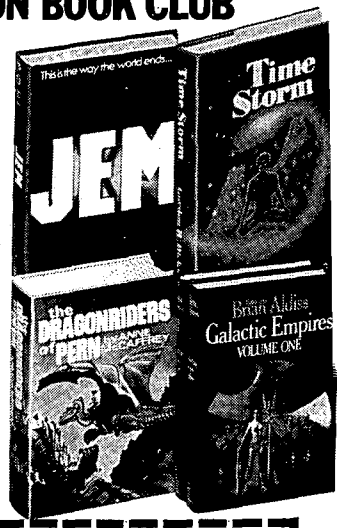

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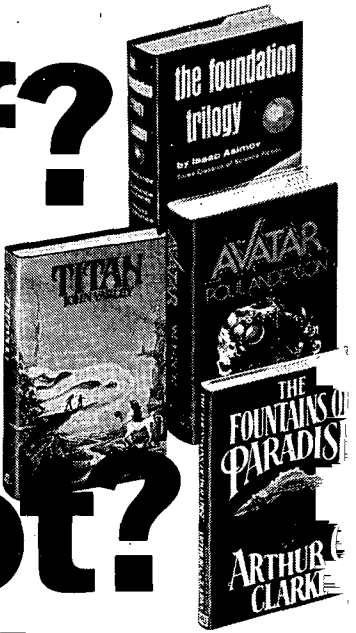

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